

# Mainstreaming Gender in Political Science Courses: The Case of Comparative Public Policy

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This article provides a concrete example of how one advanced undergraduate course in political science has taken seriously a gender dimension in its design and pedagogical approach. Intended as a gateway to graduate work, Comparative Public Policy (POL S 432) provides students with a deep understanding about the capacity of the contemporary democratic state to promote women's rights and status, in their full intersectional complexity, and to strike down systems of gender hierarchies in society. Since I first started offering POL S 432 at Washington State University in 2003, students have learned the tools of conducting research and policy analysis in a comparative perspective through the lens of the politics and processes of feminist and environmental policy in five postindustrial democracies. Using my 2002 book, *Theorizing Feminist Policy*, as a core text and the comparative analysis of feminist policy formation, from over 450 pieces of feminist work in the relatively new subarea of feminist comparative policy, the course mainstreams gender into an area of study, comparative public policy, that often has ignored gender considerations (Mazur and Hoard 2014).

Students learn how to conduct both primary and secondary source research in the context of theory-building questions about whether institutional factors are the most important drivers in authoritative and concrete government action. In other words, students confront the questions of how and to what extent institutions make democracies more democratic in the process of elaborating and implementing gender equality and environmental policies. This course goes beyond adding women's issues as one more additional policy area or dimension. Rather, POL S 432 is designed to allow students to study, learn about and grasp how the puzzle of gender, identified by the editors of this symposium "...as a fundamental, pervasive and politically negotiated dimension of societal inequalities and power relations" (Ackerly and Mügge 2016) is at the center of issues of democratic performance and governance. Thus, this essay presents an example of how gender can be an important part of the political science curriculum outside of any explicit feminist focus, a major goal of this symposium

The first part of the article presents the course's design, core textbooks, curriculum and assignments. The next section discusses how introducing students to gender through the

lens of the dynamics of feminist policy formation and the literature that studies it in a course on comparative public policy is beneficial for the knowledge and understanding gained in the class and more generally for teaching political science. The conclusion reflects upon the lessons learned from the course for "transforming" political science through mainstreaming gender.

## POL S 432: DESIGN, READINGS, AND CURRICULUM ASSIGNMENTS

The course is designed to introduce political science majors to graduate level research and analytical skills through the use of an analytical model that tests hypotheses and builds theory in an intensive hands-on research project situated in a small group setting that ends with a coordinated research conference where students present their findings and discuss how their work contributes to the theories being tested in the class model.<sup>1</sup> Students are introduced to and apply a process-oriented framework, the comparative policy formation model, to study similarities and differences in the politics of policy formation in the sectors of environmental and feminist policy in a selection of western postindustrial democracies (the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and Germany). The model provides a platform to understand the unfolding of the policy processes across time in four different stages—pre-adoption, adoption, implementation, and evaluation (Anderson 2014)—to assess whether policy processes and outcomes are authoritative/"concrete"/"material" or "symbolic"; and to identify the major drivers/ingredients/factors for developing responsive, effective, and authoritative policies.<sup>2</sup>

The policy formation process and outcome constitutes a composite dependent variable and the menu of potential factors, the independent variables—institutions, majority party power, political culture, socioeconomic factors, culture, public opinion, policy entrepreneurs, or extra-national influences. The model, therefore, allows for the assessment of the major theoretical propositions, about which ingredients produce effective and authoritative policies in postindustrial democracies. The model hypothesizes that institutions may be the most crucial factor in explaining whether governments respond symbolically or concretely to demands for social change above the other factors. Thus, the analytical question for the class and the focus of the end of semester

research conference is “Do Institutions Matter?: Making Feminist and Environmental Policy Work in Postindustrial Democracies.”

Students first learn about feminist comparative policy and comparative public policy as areas of study in the broader context of the discipline of political science in the United States and in Europe. In the next part of the semester, class lectures and discussions cover general specification of the model components and how each process unfolds through examples of policy from both the environmental and feminist policy sectors. The model structures student data collection as well as individual, group, and class analyses. In the last section of class, prior to the in-class research conference, the major issues and dynamics of each policy sector in postindustrial democracies in the past 40 years are covered.

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The bulk of student work is spent on conducting research for, discussing, writing about, and presenting the results of the collaborative comparative policy research project. Ten student groups, of five students each, are established the first week of the semester through random assignment, two for each of the policy sectors in each of the five countries. Each group is tasked to select a discrete policy decision to study in their sector and country, after conducting several weeks of research. Each research group member must select and study one of the stages of the policy process—pre adoption, adoption, implementation, or evaluation—in the group’s specific policy. The individual policy to be selected by the group may be a piece of legislation, a court decision, an executive order, a government plan, etc.<sup>3</sup>

Students conduct research independently on their process throughout the semester and submit two research journals, starting with the work covered in the two assigned books on each policy sector (Mazur 2002; Desai 2002). They are required to cover a range of primary and secondary sources, log a total of 24 hours of time on the research and must do systematic searches of expert work, government and NGO sources, and newspapers. Students present their research at the in-class research conference, which they also write about in more detail in the final research paper addressing the class question about whether institutions matter. First, country group presentations are made and then the class conducts together an aggregate comparative policy analysis across the five countries and the two policy sectors to examine whether institutions are the most

important factor, or not, in explaining authoritative policy outcomes.

#### **BENEFITS OF MAINSTREAMING GENDER FOR STUDENT LEARNING AND TEACHING**

##### **Benefit 1. Depoliticizes Gender Politics as a Legitimate Object of Study in Political Science**

The design of this course situates the comparative study of feminist policy within the discipline of political science and the subarea of comparative public policy and places the analysis of feminist policy on an equal footing with environmental policy analysis. Students are taught how to apply an analytical model that treats seriously an object of study that brings in gender politics and issues and includes theories about gendered processes, gender norms, feminist institutionalism, and gender and the state alongside more general theories

from comparative politics and policy. The course introduces students to the basics of comparative policy research and theory-building with specific illustrations from feminist policy and actual deep working knowledge about what constitutes gender inequality, about how feminist demands emerge and are articulated, and about the government action that attempts to respond to those demands through individual student research projects as well as class lectures, readings, and the closing comparative research conference.

POL S 432 is designed to engage all students in the analysis of feminist and environmental policy regardless of their own personal views on politics. The random assignment of student groups to environmental and feminist sectors downplays individual political positions. When the politics of feminist policy in the United States is presented, it is in analytical, cross-national terms; for example, why does the United States have less authoritative policy on family leave and reproductive rights compared to other western postindustrial democracies? Given that the class is formally presented in the course catalog as a class on comparative public policy, students do not opt-in or out due to its gendered content. Typically, there is an equal number of men and women. In the 13 years I have taught the course, students have neither complained about the course’s politicized nature nor about its focus on gender issues. Instead, I have seen students from a wide range of backgrounds work together to understand the processes of feminist policy formation and the forces that promote or prevent authoritative policy in comparison to environmental policy. This means that, rather than any specific approach to feminist politics, the student take away is an understanding

of how the study of gender and policy fits into areas of study which do not have an explicit gendered purview and how gender equality policy works, or not, as a central part of the democratic process.

**Benefit 2. Provides Substantive Knowledge about the Complexities of Gender and the State in Postindustrial Democracies through Scholarly Research**

In the second week of class, students learn the operational definition I developed in my 2002 book from feminist comparative scholarship to identify and analyze real-world feminist policies—government action that seeks to promote women’s rights and status, in their full intersectional complexity cutting across race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age, etc., and to strike down systems of gender hierarchies in society. Thus, from the very beginning of the semester to its end, gender, intersectionality, equality, and women’s rights as they are expressed in formal feminist government action are put on the learning agenda. We also discuss why I use the label feminist rather than women’s rights, gender equality, or women’s policy. The environmental and feminist policy sectors are initially set-up as critical areas for postindustrial democracies; rising demands for gender equality and environmental justice in the 1960s and 1970s challenged governments to change their policies and include formerly excluded interests.

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Given the course’s politics of policy formation approach with an emphasis on policy actors, students become familiar with the range of state and non-state actors and instruments involved with feminist and environmental policy. For feminist policy these include women’s movements, both anti-system and reform oriented groups, gender policy experts, women’s policy machineries, and the individuals who work for them (femocrats). It also includes government bodies and groups beyond the nation-state, such as the United Nations and its women’s policy summits, and the European Union and the various gender equality policy instruments elaborated by international organizations, such as gender mainstreaming, gender budgets and gender equality indices. Students also learn about the major issues of each policy sector for postindustrial democracies since WWII and the general patterns in policy responses. They consider the hypothesis that feminist policies in general tend to be more symbolic than environmental policies due to the degree to which feminist demands come from a marginalized position in society often challenging deeply entrenched gender norms and, hence, pose a potential threat to the status quo.

Students learn about feminist policy as a highly complex and transversal sector and the specific processes, instruments, and actors of the sector through the expert scholarship conducted by feminist policy researchers, starting with my analysis of 27 cases of feminist policy across seven subsectors from over 450 pieces of published work.<sup>4</sup> The student research groups that cover feminist policy have to pick a discrete policy in one of the seven subsectors. Students are also required to do searches of work by the authors cited in my book for their research projects.

**Benefit 3. Teaches Students about Comparative Empirical Theory-Building on Democracy, Institutions and Feminism**

The class model compels students to think about feminist policy formation in terms of making democracies more democratic and also to consider the major propositions about what determines authoritative and responsive government policy: institutional factors like the formal rules of the game, parliamentary versus presidential systems, federal versus unitary territorial division of power; the gendered nature of institutions; politics in terms of the governing majority in power; socioeconomic factors such as economic wealth or the role of women in the workforce; political culture, and cultural influences such as religion or gender norms. Reflecting an increasing focus on representation for much comparative work on

gender and politics (Mazur and Hoard 2014), the class looks at the core question of whether, how and why democracies represent women, descriptively, through the participation of actors that speak for gender equality in the process and, substantively, through the inclusion of demands for gender equality in the content of policy.

The question of whether institutions, or other forces, matter in determining authoritative and concrete outcomes come out of the new institutionalism and comparative politics and policy, particularly the question about whether economics or politics are the most important ingredients for responsive policy processes and outcomes. Looking at the influence of women’s policy machineries and other feminist policy actors, of state feminism and of embedded gender norms in advancing meaningful policies reflects theoretical discussions in feminist institutionalism and the comparative politics of gender more generally. As many feminist scholars assert, work on comparative politics and policy and new institutionalism has tended to ignore gender dynamics and concerns and the large body of work that studies it (Mazur and Hoard 2014). Placing feminist work on the same footing as this “mainstream” political

science scholarship has the potential to promote a better integration between feminist and non-feminist work, student understanding about that dialog in the context of the course and, perhaps even more importantly, students to pursue and work on these issues outside of class and after they graduate.

## CONCLUSION

Mainstreaming gender in POL S 432 gives students a solid understanding about conducting comparative policy research and analysis, about comparative theory-building, and about feminist policy issues and the literature that studies them as an important part of political science. The deep substantive knowledge gained about feminist and environmental policy formation and outcomes in postindustrial democracies gives students priceless insights about the critical and complicated processes of democracy and the challenges of making stable democracies more democratic. Given that the theoretical and empirical foundations learned in the course are directly related to feminist scholarship, students become well-acquainted with the feminist policy literature within a broader methodological and disciplinary context. At the end of the semester, during the research conference and class comparative discussions, I am always impressed by the extent of student understanding of feminist policy and the depth of student research. The closing student comparative analyses of what contributes to successful and meaningful policies in the environmental and feminist sectors often achieve the graduate level. Moreover, despite the course's heavy workload, I tend to receive my highest student evaluations of any course I teach; indicating that students are quite satisfied with learning about and grappling with feminist policy issue in comparative context. I often hear from many former students that they have applied the lessons learned in POLS 432 in their work or graduate programs. Some students carry their research interests onto graduate school with the idea that gender is an integral part of political science.

In closing, my experiences with POLS 432 confirm what the editors of this symposium and others have shown more generally, mainstreaming gender in a meaningful way in the classroom has the potential to promote good practices in pedagogy and produce learning outcomes that contribute to the success of political science majors after graduation (Mügge, Evans and Engeli 2016). Mainstreaming gender in individual

classes may also help to transform the political science curriculum and the discipline itself through placing feminist scholarship at the center of political science research and teaching. At the very least, mainstreaming gender in the political science classroom constitutes a first important step in achieving much-needed, long-term and lasting change.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/S1049096516000998>. ■

## NOTES

1. For the syllabus and detailed instructions for the comparative research project see the online supplement attached to this article.
2. Policies that are “symbolic (Edelman 1964)” consist of “outputs” without implementation, practice or results. “Concrete,” “Material,” or “Authoritative” policies consist of outputs with teeth that go beyond a formal paper existence to generate real interest and institutional feedback among policy actors inside and outside of the state with effective implementation. Concrete policies tend to address, if not solve, the problem originally identified by the policy. Anderson (2014, 16) develops a symbolic/ material continuum to place policies, which I use in my analysis of feminist policy formation (2002) and introduce the students to use as well.
3. The following are the discrete policies studied by the class in Spring 2013: Great Britain: Human Fertilization and Embryo Act, 1990; USA: Executive Order 11733- Women in the Military, 1967; Australia: Western Australia Equal Opportunities Act, 1984; Germany: Family Leave Policy, 2005-06.
4. These subsectors include: blueprint, political representation, equal employment, reconciliation, family law, reproductive rights and sexuality and anti violence policy.

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