

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND POLITICS

Researching Gender and Institutions

Introduction

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Exposing and analyzing political institutions as sites of gendered power relations are crucial strategies for understanding inequalities in public and political life. These insights have been central to the work of institutionally oriented feminist political scientists for two decades — including the more recent feminist institutionalist (FI) approach. In particular FI seeks systematically to integrate institutionalist approaches to politics with gendered analysis (Kenny 2007; Krook and Mackay 2011; Mackay and Waylen 2009). Notwithstanding the challenges in defining and operationalizing key (and contested) concepts such as institutions and gender, it is important for feminist political scientists to ask, how do we research gendered political institutions?

Although as yet there has been little explicit discussion of method within feminist institutionalist approaches, each of the essays in this Critical Perspectives section addresses this question. Reflecting the diversity of feminist political science, they highlight its growing methodological pluralism and use of a multimethod approach as conscious strategies for capturing complexity while also seeking systematically to identify common mechanisms that explain gendered outcomes. In their contributions, Kenny, Lowndes, and Weldon reflect on how best to excavate the informal as well as the formal rules and norms that constrain and influence institutional actors as well as being, in turn, employed as resources by those same actors.

Earlier versions of all these contributions (except for Crewe) formed a roundtable on “Researching Gender and Institutions,” which was part of a European Research Council workshop on “Gendering New Institutions and Institutional Design,” held at the University of Manchester, UK, November 5–7, 2013, as part of ERC Advanced Grant, “Understanding Institutional Change: A Gender Perspective.” We would like to thank all the workshop participants for their helpful and insightful comments.

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The methods advocated include ethnography and participant observation, semistructured interviews, textual analysis, and process tracing, often as part of small-n qualitative research. And while some feminist institutionalist scholars still eschew quantitative methods in favor of qualitative strategies to “uncover” the gendered rules of the game (Lovenduski 2011) and gendered logics of appropriateness (Chappell 2006), Weldon makes the case for large-scale statistical analysis as an important part of the tool kit. As such, she reinforces the increasing acknowledgement of the complementarity of quantitative and qualitative research and the adoption of mixed methods within feminist political science.

Feminist political science has always “borrowed” from sister disciplines, and our last two contributions come from feminist scholars working in anthropology (Crewe) and law (O’Rourke). For Crewe, the institutional frame is too limiting, and she prefers to adopt an organizational framework, which she argues better captures cultural and symbolic elements. In contrast, O’Rourke suggests that more attention should be paid to the “rules about the rules,” the wider legal and constitutional frameworks within which political institutions do their work. Although their empirical material is common to political scientists, Crewe and O’Rourke bring a different set of questions and approaches to the study of institutions, thus demonstrating how dialogue and exchange can enrich feminist political scientists’ understanding of gendered institutions.

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