

Doing Politics Differently? Applying a Feminist Institutional Lens to the U.K. Women’s Equality Party

Elizabeth Evans 

Goldsmiths University of London

Meryl Kenny

University of Edinburgh

The U.K. Women’s Equality Party (WEP) was established in 2015 to “bring about change by winning — support, votes and seats.” It has thus far recruited tens of thousands of members and run candidates in European, national, devolved, and local elections. This article provides one of the first empirical analyses of this new actor in U.K. politics. Adopting a feminist institutionalist lens, we examine the extent to which WEP “does things differently” by looking at its discourse, formal party rules, and informal ways of doing things “on the ground.” Drawing on a set of semistructured interviews, observations of local and national party meetings, and document analysis, we argue that while WEP has to some extent tried to set up alternative participatory structures and new “ways of working,” it has also at times fallen back on more traditional, centralized, and hierarchical modes of party organizing, as well as informal practices that are more typically associated with male-dominated parties.

Keywords: Women’s parties, political parties, U.K. politics, feminist institutionalism, feminism

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The story of women's representation in the United Kingdom has been one of promise unfulfilled. On the one hand, all of the major U.K. parties have made at least rhetorical attempts to engage with both the descriptive (or numerical) representation of women and the substantive representation of women's issues and interests (Childs 2008; Kenny 2018). There are also prominent women "at the top" of British politics – at time of this writing, including former prime minister Theresa May; Nicola Sturgeon, first minister of Scotland and leader of the Scottish National Party; and Arlene Foster, leader of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party, among others.

While some progress has been made with respect to the feminization of U.K. politics, this has stalled in recent years. Despite the presence of women in leadership positions across U.K. legislatures, as well as a vibrant, visible, and active women's movement (Evans 2015), women remain underrepresented at all levels of U.K. politics. Recent political developments highlight the ways in which U.K. politics continues to be coded as male in multiple and overlapping ways: women continued to be selected in unwinnable seats in the 2017 general election¹; a recent report commissioned by members of Parliament (MPs) found that as many as one in five people working in Westminster have experienced sexual harassment²; black and Asian women MPs are disproportionately the targets of online abuse³; and women politicians are not only less likely to receive media coverage but also less likely to be taken seriously (Ross et al. 2013). In short, there is some way to go toward achieving equality of power between men and women in British politics.

In explaining the persistence of women's political underrepresentation, scholars have repeatedly pointed to the important gatekeeping role of political parties, citing evidence of well-entrenched gender bias in British party politics, including direct and indirect forms of gender-based discrimination against women (Childs 2008; Lovenduski 2005; Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Work in the field has increasingly focused on

1. Analysis by the Constitution Unit, "More Female Candidates Have been selected but the Gender Balance of the House of Commons Is Likely to Be Little Changed after June 8," May 24, 2017, <https://constitution-unit.com/2017/05/24/more-female-candidates-have-been-selected-but-the-gender-balance-of-the-house-of-commons-is-likely-to-be-little-changed-after-june-8/> (accessed July 10, 2018).

2. See statement by Andrea Leadsom, leader of the House of Commons, February 8, 2018, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2018-02-08/debates/D3F55250-04A5-4CFE-B87A-64E49819E5F7/IndependentComplaintsAndGrievancePolicy> (accessed June 22, 2018).

3. Amnesty International UK, "Black and Asian Women MPs Abused More Online," <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/online-violence-women-mps> (accessed July 11, 2018).

political parties as gendered organizations, highlighting the ways in which both the formal and informal “rules of the game” often create an inhospitable climate for women members and candidates (Childs and Webb 2012; Kenny 2013; Lovenduski 2005). As Lovenduski (2005, 56) famously noted, “If parliament is the warehouse of traditional masculinity . . . political parties are its major distributors.”

It is within this political context that the U.K. Women’s Equality Party (WEP) emerged in March 2015, driven by a desire to see “women enjoy the same rights and opportunities as men so that all can flourish.”⁴ Later that year, the party officially registered with the Electoral Commission, and Reuters journalist Sophie Walker was appointed as the party’s first leader.⁵ By the end of the year, the party claimed to have around 65,000 members and more than 70 local branches across the United Kingdom, while also fielding candidates in local, devolved, and general elections. Women’s parties are not new — more than 30 have been formed in Europe in the last three decades — but they provide important insights into the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion within political parties and can serve as channels of representation and mobilization for women (Cowell-Meyers 2016). Moreover, as female-dominated parties specifically committed to challenging the unequal distribution of political power, they offer the possibility of “doing things differently” in party politics, potentially opening up “new pathways to political inclusion” (Evans and Kenny 2019, 4).

This article explores these questions through a qualitative case study of WEP, providing an in-depth analysis of the process of building a women’s party on the ground. Using a feminist institutionalist lens, the article assesses the party as a new organization, mapping formal rules and processes as well as informal norms and practices, during the first two years of the party’s existence. It evaluates the extent to which WEP has managed to “do politics differently” in terms of its ideology, organizational structure, and ways of working. We find that while WEP has attempted to formalize new innovations in terms of alternative participatory structures and feminist modes of organizing, these exist alongside older and more hierarchical modes of party decision-making and leadership. Moreover, despite a rapidly developing formal rule book, the party has tended to fall back on informalized practices, which are

4. Mission statement of the Women’s Equality Party, <http://www.womensequality.org.uk> (accessed March 1, 2019).

5. Sophie Walker resigned as party leader in January 2019. Mandu Reid was appointed interim leader of the party.

more typically associated with male-dominated parties. In the case of WEP then, possibilities for “doing politics differently” have been constrained by institutional legacies, as well as ongoing dynamics in the British political system (including gender regimes), which have largely foreclosed opportunities for new political paths. This case study therefore improves our understanding of both the general and gendered obstacles to institutional innovation and party change.

GENDER, PARTIES, AND INSTITUTIONS

Feminist scholars of party politics have begun to shift their focus from “women *in*” to “gender *and*” political parties (see, e.g., Bjarnegård 2013; Hinojosa 2012; Kenny 2013; Lovenduski 2005). In doing so, many of these scholars have drawn on the insights of feminist institutionalism, a variant of new institutional theory that seeks “to include women as actors in political processes, to ‘gender’ institutionalism, and to move the research agenda towards questions about the interplay between gender and the operation and effect of political institutions” (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010, 574). We understand gender here as a constitutive element of social relations based on perceived differences between women and men, and as a way of signifying and naturalizing relationships of power and hierarchy (cf. Scott 1986). Feminist institutionalism (FI) is centrally concerned with the analysis of power: institutions, in this view, are not gender-neutral, but rather reflect and reinforce power inequalities (Kenny 2007). FI scholars conceptualize institutions as the “rules of the game,” which provide a structure of incentives and disincentives to political actors and express norms of appropriate and inappropriate behavior (Lowndes 2014). They have also sought to evaluate how discourse shapes and is shaped by institutions, highlighting the complex and gendered interplay between “interrelations of institutional arrangements, actor constellations and political discourse” (Kulawik 2009, 267; see also Kantola 2006).

Political parties, as gendered organizations, play an important role in shaping the extent to which women (and, indeed, *which* women) are included or excluded from the political process (Lovenduski 2005). Much of the work on gender and party politics has focused on formal regulations and party rules, demonstrating, for example, how formal rule changes such as electoral system reform and the adoption of gender quotas can alter established party practices, leading to increases in

women's political presence (see, e.g., Dahlerup 2006). Yet research in the field also points to the importance of comparing the content of formal rules with actual practices (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2016). Formal rule changes tend to have a larger impact on parties that are also "rule followers" (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2016), but they may have very little effect on parties that are more informalized; thus, we can never assess formal rules on their own. More recent scholarship has sought to investigate more explicitly both the specific influence of informal institutions and the interplay between formal and informal rules.

Rather than look at formal and informal rules as separate and contrasting elements of the institutional landscape, an FI approach highlights the need to consider a continuum from highly formal to informal, with many places in between (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2015; Kenny 2013). On the one hand, informal practices may reinforce change, ensuring that formal rules are actually complied with. Informal networks and relationships can also be mobilized in favor of women, to push for party and policy change (see, e.g., Piscopo 2016). Yet, on the other hand, informal practices can often conflict with or override formal rule changes or exist alongside formal arrangements as a parallel institutional framework (Helmke and Levitsky 2006). And when formal rules are not actively maintained or enforced, political actors can mobilize informal practices to resist formal rule changes (such as gender quotas) that clash with their interests (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2015; Hinojosa 2012).

WEP provides an interesting case through which to interrogate the gendered dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in party politics and evaluate the design of a new party from the ground up. As Kimberly Cowell-Meyers (2016, 4) highlights, women's parties are defined by their "explicit agenda to advance the volume and range of women's voices in politics." Emerging in contexts where women were unevenly empowered, these new parties attempt to distinguish themselves from distrusted mainstream parties in a number of ways: including, often emphasizing a nonpartisan ideology; adopting nonhierarchical and decentralized power structures; and implementing feminist modes of organizing and consciousness-raising tactics (Cowell-Meyers 2011, 2016; Dominelli and Jonsdottir 1998; Evans and Kenny 2019; Zaborsky 1987). Yet both party politics and gender scholars have raised "the question of what constitutes 'newness' and what qualifies as 'new'" (Barnea and Rahat 2010, 304). Political organizations and institutions are rarely created *de novo*; rather, they are "nested" within dense institutional

environments, including gender regimes (cf. Mackay 2014). New party organizations are likely to be shaped by both the past as well as ongoing interactions with the existing party system; similarly, old parties are never static, incorporating new elements and reforming structures and rules (Barnea and Rahat 2010). Institutional and organizational innovation, then, is often a case of bounded change within an existing system, which can both open up but also foreclose opportunities for new paths and ways of working.

By investigating the extent to which WEP has built a “different” kind of party, we contribute to the burgeoning literature on women’s parties as a means through which to increase the access and inclusion of marginalized groups (Cowell-Meyers 2016, 2017, 2019; Evans and Kenny 2019). Moreover, while this growing body of work has often focused on the demand side of the story around why women’s parties emerge, we add an important dimension to this research by focusing on women’s parties as *organizational actors*, focusing on the “inner life” of political parties and the design and implementation of formal and informal rules on the ground. By highlighting the importance of attending to the ways in which new parties are enacted in gendered ways by gendered actors using formal and informal rules and practices, this article therefore contributes to the big questions with regard to party organizations and the party and political system, highlighting both general and gendered challenges to effecting change.

METHODS

Studying the emergence of WEP in the United Kingdom provides a unique opportunity to evaluate the building of a new political party and the design of and interplay between formal and informal rules in action. Formal rules are consciously designed and specified in writing (Lowndes 2014). Researching formal party rules is relatively straightforward, then, involving the collection of party documents and written material; although, as Bjarnegård and Kenny (2015) point out, these are not always readily available to outsiders.

In the case of WEP, a range of documents were collected and analyzed from the first two years of the party’s existence, dating from the formation of the party in March 2015 until just after the party’s first conference in November 2016. These documents were used in two ways: first, as a source of thick description, setting the context and providing a paper trail

of the sequence of events in WEP's early formation, as well as the party's organizational architecture; and second, as temporally and historically situated accounts that are receptacles of particular norms, meanings, and values. These included official party documents such as WEP's policy manifestos for U.K. and Scottish elections; the party's constitution; and party guidelines for parliamentary and other selections. Other documents — including candidate and party campaign materials, minutes of meetings, internal party correspondence, and relevant media coverage — were either obtained by the authors or provided by party officials, candidates, and members.

Informal dynamics within political parties are more difficult to capture, partly because of the often hidden character of these practices (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2015; Hinojosa 2012). Accordingly, scholars working in the FI tradition have tended to use more time-consuming and field-intensive qualitative methods to identify the “rules-in-use” in particular empirical contexts, including in-depth interviews, participant and nonparticipant observation, and semi-ethnographic methods (see, e.g., Malley 2012; Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Verge and de la Fuente 2014). These kinds of approaches are important to understand the role that informal practices and conventions play in particular party contexts, but also to investigate whether formal rules and regulations *really do* structure behavior in practice (Lowndes 2014).

These issues were particularly important in the case of WEP, in which, during the empirical time frame in question, relatively few rules were written down (or were in the process of being written down at the time). Interviews were therefore often the most effective method for understanding the how, what, when, where, and why of political decision-making (cf. Lowndes 2014). We conducted 20 semistructured interviews (each lasting between one and two hours), undertaken between March 2015 and May 2018. The interview sample included central party officers and staff, election candidates, and branch officers and members. We focused primarily on branches in London and Scotland — key sites in the run-up to the London mayoral and Scottish Parliament elections, in which the party ran candidates for the first time in 2016. To unearth the “real” rules guiding party decision-making, we talked to actors about “how things are done around here” and “why do you do X but not Y?” (cf. Lowndes 2014). Alongside formal interviews and document analysis, we also deployed “rapid ethnographic” techniques (Galea et al. 2015), observing party meetings and candidate campaign events at the branch and national levels, as well as the party's

inaugural conference in Manchester in 2016 (with observations and interactions recorded in field notes). As Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Samantha Majic (2017) highlight, “getting close” to the subjects under study can provide key evidence that is not necessarily accessible by other means, and, in this case, it yielded more rich and detailed material about WEP’s internal party dynamics, the “rules-in-use” within the party, and their implementation in practice (see also Majic 2017).

Our research design raised a number of challenges that are worth noting. Semi-ethnographic methods require considerable effort to be expended in developing relationships and building trust to gain access (Schwartz-Shea and Majic 2017). This presented challenges for us in terms of our position vis-à-vis the party, where, as feminist scholars, it was sometimes assumed by research participants that we were party members (we are not) or that we could offer advice on party strategy or policy. We addressed these concerns by explaining the research process and likely sites of publication, as well as formally presenting our initial research findings to groups within the party, situating these within the wider body of research on women’s parties. It was also agreed with all interviewees that they would not be identified personally. Given the small number of candidates and branch officers, this has meant that we anonymized some interviewee roles and locations.

An additional challenge of studying WEP as a new party in the early stages of its development was that internal consistency and levels of knowledge varied widely regarding party rules, organizational structures, and policy positions. This meant that, as researchers, it was essential to follow events “on the ground” as closely as possible; it also highlighted that divergent accounts from different participants are themselves a part of the research process, shedding light into the ways in which particular events and meanings are constructed at different times and in different institutional sites.⁶

Finally, our single-case study design presents certain trade-offs in terms of our ability to make wider theoretical and empirical claims. However, it is important not to interpret these issues through the prism of statistical methods; case studies make different claims to generalizability. Indeed, the goal for feminist institutionalist scholars is to identify common causal mechanisms (of power, continuity, change) — mechanisms that are often most visible at the level of single-case studies and may have

6. See Kenny (2013) on this point.

portability in other contexts (cf. Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010; Pierson 2004).

WEP: DISCURSIVELY DIFFERENT?

Political parties are not singular organizations — they are, as Richard Katz and Peter Mair (2009) noted, akin to political systems, nested within wider institutional configurations and composed of different “faces” or aspects. One significant litmus test for “newness” is the party’s label and ideology; both are important ways that parties can distinguish themselves from the political status quo as they present themselves to the electorate (Barnea and Rahat 2010). In terms of its label, WEP initially attracted some criticism from within the feminist community for calling themselves a “women’s party” rather than a “feminist party.”⁷ While the majority of our interviewees identified as feminists and felt that WEP was a feminist party, other members openly objected to this in party meetings and events and preferred the “women’s party” label: “I guess initially there was a bit of effort not to use the word because it’s just so laden with lots of stuff.” However, party leader Sophie Walker and party cofounder Catherine Mayer repeatedly self-identified as feminist during speeches and public interviews, and the party has subsequently described itself as the “UK’s first feminist political party” on its website.⁸

Despite contestations over the party’s label, the clearest difference between WEP and other U.K. parties is ideology. WEP’s claim that it was “borne out of a demand for a different kind of politics”⁹ was echoed by party interviewees, who regularly invoked the rhetoric of difference: “People are tired of the way in which parties carry on, they want something new and something different and we are really speaking to that.” Women’s parties are not women’s wings or branches of established political parties, they are “self-conscious and explicit constructions around gender” that seek to disrupt male-dominated institutions and structures of political power (Cowell-Meyers 2016, 5; see also Dominelli and Jonsdottir 1988). As with other women’s parties, then, female

7. Holly Dustin, “Party Lines,” *Trouble & Strife*, February 2, 2016, <https://www.troubleandstrife.org/?s=Women%27s+Equality+Party> (accessed July 5, 2018).

8. Women’s Equality Party, “Frequently Asked Questions,” <https://www.womensequality.org.uk/faqs> (accessed March 1, 2019).

9. Women’s Equality Party, “Join Us,” <http://www.womensequality.org.uk/join> (accessed June 4, 2018).

dominance is not seen as problem for WEP but rather as a given. Formally, WEP allows both men and women to join the party and to stand as candidates and does not use gender quotas. However, in practice, the overwhelming majority of its candidates have been women. In 2016, for example, the party ran 26 candidates in the devolved and London elections, only one of whom was a man (occupying the fourth of six positions on the party's regional list in Glasgow).

The party has also tried to adopt an intersectional feminist praxis, seeing this as a key point of differentiation from traditional male-dominated parties: "I don't want to be like those male political parties who are speaking for women." Initially, however, there were few formal rules around intersectionality, an issue that we will return to in the next section. According to London interviewees, the central party was keen to ensure the selection of a diverse range of candidates for the London Assembly elections in May 2016, with central HQ instructing the London branches to nominate three people for the list, at least one of whom should be a black or ethnic minority candidate. However, in the time period under study, the party did not have any formal rules on the books with regard to intersectional representation. Moreover, while the party's first leader, Sophie Walker, repeatedly reaffirmed the importance of intersectional feminist politics during her tenure — for example, using her first speech to party conference in 2016 to highlight the party's commitment to women of color, disabled women, and the LGBT community — she subsequently resigned from the party in January 2019, citing her frustration with the limits of her own work to "ensure that women of colour, working class women and disabled women see themselves reflected in [WEP] and know they can lead this movement."¹⁰

While all women's parties use their party label to designate themselves as representatives of women, some are more preoccupied with inclusion and representation than radical transformation (Cowell-Meyers 2016). In the case of WEP, the party initially assumed a nonpartisan label — a political strategy commonly adopted by women's parties to have an impact across the political spectrum (Cowell-Meyers 2011). The party's nonpartisan stance is formally entrenched in its core policy document, first published in 2015, which describes WEP as a "focused mainstream party" that "will never take a party line on issues outside our remit"

10. Rajeev Syal, "Women's Equality Party Leader Sophie Walker Steps Down," *Guardian*, January 22, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jan/22/womens-equality-party-leader-sophie-walker-steps-down> (accessed June 21, 2019).

(Women's Equality Party 2015). Formal guidance for candidates seeking selection also stated that WEP candidates were "nonpartisan" and "free to express" their own personal views on issues beyond the party's "core goals and policies — driving women's equality up the political agenda" (Women's Equality Party 2016b).

In practice, however, the party leans left. Research on women and politics overwhelmingly suggests that left parties are more likely to promote women's descriptive and substantive representation because they espouse egalitarian ideologies that are centered on equality of outcome (Caul 1999; Lühiste and Kenny 2016). Parties of the right, on the other hand, promote an "equality of opportunity" approach that is centered on a gender-neutral understanding of political power or that emphasizes a more traditional view of women's roles. Yet while WEP's left-of-center policy positions perhaps help differentiate it further from traditional male-dominated parties, the party has largely adopted a liberal feminist perspective centrally focused on equality, rather than wider structural change — although it did adopt more radical positions on the controversial issue of prostitution, with a commitment to the Nordic model (Evans and Kenny 2019).

In its first formal policy document, the party outlined six core objectives around issues of equal representation, pay, parenting and caregiving, education, treatment in the media, and an end to violence against women (Women's Equality Party 2015). The party does not have an economic policy or foreign policy. Therefore, in focusing on representation and equality rather than radical transformation, the party has failed to convincingly differentiate itself from established mainstream parties in the United Kingdom, which, as previously highlighted, have become increasingly "feminized" in terms of formal and informal commitments to advancing women's descriptive and substantive representation, and have shifted toward a more liberal feminist position (Childs 2008; Kenny 2018). It also means that the party's liberal gender frame is further disconnected from the dominant ideologies of the U.K. women's movement (Evans 2015, 2016).

WEP has also strategically employed discursive tactics used by male-dominated parties, in particular drawing on existing discourses around "anti-politics" to differentiate itself from mainstream "politics as usual." Anti-politics refers to "negative sentiment towards the activities and institutions of formal politics" (Clarke et al. 2018, 17). Anti-politics should not simply be conflated with skepticism or apathy; rather, it describes an active negativity targeted toward politicians and parties in

general. It has been increasingly associated with support for populist parties, which have sought to capitalize on anti-political sentiment by arguing that they represent “the people” against “elite” politicians and parties. In the United Kingdom, these discursive strategies have been employed most obviously by the United Kingdom Independence Party, a far-right Euroskeptical political party that has sought to channel the frustrations of the so-called left behind (Ford and Goodwin 2014; Jennings, Stoker, and Twyman 2016).

WEP has repeatedly used the “out-of-touch” trope to describe mainstream parties, a discursive tactic common among populist parties that frame themselves as “anti-political politicians” (Clarke et al. 2018). For instance, the membership section of WEP’s website declares that the “politics that dominate the UK are unrepresentative, uninspiring and out of touch with everyday women’s needs,”¹¹ while leader Sophie Walker observed that “politics has become a word that means distant people.”¹² Some interviewees further confirmed that they were directly “inspired” by the U.K. Independence Party’s (UKIP’s) strategy of appealing to the electorate: “if you look at UKIP and their message, I mean I obviously don’t agree with them, but their message has worked really well and I think we can use that.” Meanwhile, another interviewee observed that “UKIP gets its message across and makes it clear that the mainstream parties are out of touch. We need to do that too, although you know, without the racism.” Yet, despite adopting similar tactics to UKIP, WEP has still managed to differentiate itself by adding a gendered dimension to anti-politics arguments. In other words, the party argues that it is not just politicians and parties that are out of touch, but that the political class is dominated by *male* politicians who are out of touch with women’s interests and therefore unable to advance women’s equality: “when I’m speaking to people, they get that something’s gone wrong with our politics and that politicians don’t seem to understand what people want anymore, and part of that is that it’s men who are the ones dominating politics.”

11. Women’s Equality Party, “Frequently Asked Questions.”

12. Louise Ridley, “Women’s Equality Party Leader Sophie Walker Wants to End the Culture of White Men in Suits,” Huffington Post UK, August 9, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/09/08/womens-equality-party-sophie-walker_n_8101762.html?utm_hp_ref=tw&gucounter=1 (accessed June 3, 2018).

WEP: ORGANIZATIONALLY DIFFERENT?

As new parties, women's parties are marked by a high degree of fluidity, both in terms of their support base as well as their organizational infrastructure. Newness can open up spaces for innovation and "doing things differently," free from the general and gendered biases and vested interests that can be found in existing organizations and institutions. Yet these moments of opportunity are then followed by longer periods of institutionalization and uncertainty, as new structures, rules, and practices are either embedded and consolidated or amended, neglected, and discarded (cf. Mackay 2014). Moreover, as already highlighted, while women's parties are new entrants to the political system, they are not free-floating; they emerge from within and interact with wider institutional and party political environments, constraining the potential for institutional innovation and limiting possibilities for reform. New parties also face particular challenges in that they are not just electoral vehicles, they are organizational actors who have to "reconcile conflicting external and internal demands" (of which vote winning is only one) in order to survive in the long run (Bolleyer 2013, 3). These issues are particularly acute for "rooted" new parties emerging alongside social movements — such as women's parties or green parties — which must manage the relationship between party and movement actors and structures (Bolleyer 2013; Dominelli and Jonsdottir 1988).

Angelo Panebianco (1988, 54) famously argued that "all parties must institutionalize to a certain extent to survive." In other words, new parties need to build a viable organizational infrastructure where the "rules of the game" (both formal and informal) are routinized and regularized within the party (cf. Levitsky 1998). Studies of women's political representation add an important gendered dimension to these dynamics, generally arguing that formally institutionalized and bureaucratized rules and processes are more women-friendly — that is, rules that are "detailed, explicit, standardized, implemented by party officials, and authorized in party documents" (Norris 1996, 202; see also Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2016). Procedures that are rule-bound and formalized are easier for political outsiders and traditionally underrepresented groups to identify and understand and provide more grounds to appeal if political actors feel unjustly treated. Informalized or patronage-based party organizations, in contrast, are characterized by the lack of formal party rules, or rules that are written down but not implemented. These kinds of party organizations are generally less open

to women and other marginalized groups, as power tends to be passed on through networks to insiders, who are usually men from majority groups (Bjarnegård 2013).

Has WEP done things differently in terms of how it organizes? Our research on the party presents a mixed picture. In the early days of the party's formation, few rules were on the books, and those that were formally codified were not necessarily followed or were inconsistently applied. For example, candidate selection operated differently in different sites: some candidate lists were voted on by party members, while other candidates were selected by the central party, with varying degrees of vetting. WEP therefore resembles a more traditional male-dominated party, in that it is highly informalized (Evans and Kenny 2019). However, informality in male-dominated parties is often institutionalized and routinized — for example, in clientelist parties in which behavior does not necessarily correspond to formal rules but nevertheless follows regularized patterns of behavior that are “well established and widely shared” among insiders (Levitsky 1998, 88; see also Bjarnegård 2013). WEP, in contrast, has been a party in flux, with few stable rules of the game, either formal or informal.

Similar findings have been reported in other studies of women's parties, which further highlight that these parties are often reluctant to formalize party rules, not only because they are new but also because they do not want to reinforce and entrench political hierarchies. Women's parties therefore tend to adopt a feminist approach to organizing, one characterized by nonhierarchical, decentralized, and consensus-based decision-making (Levin 1999; Zaborsky 1987). Additionally, as organizationally new actors, they have had less time to build up followers and supporters who might stay loyal and need to also think about ways to sustain and grow their initial support, while also building a sense of belonging among their followers (Bolleyer 2013).

WEP has implemented a number of innovations on this front, though some have been more successful than others. At the entry level, for example, the party has introduced an “affiliate membership” category, open to members of other political parties sharing WEP's aims. Several activists and members saw this as a distinctive offer, citing the party's official nonpartisan stance and emphasis on collaborative ways of working: “it gets us beyond partisan approaches which is really important.” The party's commitment to collaborative and cross-party politics is also formally institutionalized in its mission statement, while subsequent iterations of its policy document have explicitly encouraged

other political parties to work with WEP to deliver its policies, or “simply to steal them” (Women’s Equality Party 2017). Yet the party’s political inexperience has caused tensions with some of the main U.K. political parties, particularly on the left, most of which formally bar members from joining or supporting other parties (Evans and Kenny 2019). Indeed, in some reported instances, individuals have been expelled from their original parties for registering as WEP affiliate members.¹³

WEP has also claimed to adopt an innovative approach with regards to policy development, with members invited to actively participate in the party’s policy-making process. This was formally highlighted in the party’s first policy statement, described as being “shaped by our members and supporters ... working collaboratively with experts and policy-makers.” While consultation was initially facilitated via local branches (described by one party member as a “crowdsourcing” approach), members are also able to vote on or propose policy changes at party conference. The party’s constitution — adopted at WEP’s first conference in 2016 — states that party conference is sovereign with regard to policy positions, excepting those decisions taken by the Steering Committee in between conferences. Involving members in party decision-making is not new in U.K. politics — the centrist Liberal Democrats, for example, have involved members in the policy-making process for many years (Evans 2011). But including members in this way can help party leaders signal their commitment to openness and intraparty democracy and enhance their legitimacy. In practice, however, interviews and observations of WEP meetings and events demonstrated that this bottom-up approach was not straightforward. For example, interviewees highlighted that the party invited experts to write sections of policy documents, without grassroots involvement, while significant policy decisions (e.g., taking an initial position on Brexit) were decided by the party leadership without recourse to member consultation.

Meanwhile, some members and branch officials highlighted the difficulties of participating in party conference, citing the lack of political experience among members, as well as a sense of confusion regarding both the substance and implications of what members were being asked to vote on: “it was not always clear what we were voting for or how that might play out in different branches across the UK.” This

13. Lucy Whitehouse, “The Labour Party Expelled Me for Supporting Women’s Rights,” *New Statesman*, September 26, 2016, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2016/09/labour-expelled-me-party-supporting-womens-rights> (accessed July 10, 2018).

perspective echoed our own observations of party conference, during which some delegates appeared unprepared for what they were being asked to consider. Recognizing that for many of their members the process was new and potentially confusing, conference chairs repeatedly assured members that they would “learn by doing.”

Thus, while WEP has criticized mainstream parties for being elite and out of touch, the party has continued to operate through a highly centralized and hierarchical organizational structure, often making strategic and policy decisions without the mandate of the membership. While the party’s initial structure was highly informalized — with no equivalent of a national executive committee and most decisions taken by staff and leadership at central HQ — subsequent formal rule changes have served to further concentrate power in the hands of the leadership. WEP’s first party conference in 2016 codified the role of two central and powerful committees: the Steering Committee (SC), as the party’s main decision-making body between party conferences; and the Executive Committee (EC), responsible for operational decisions. The SC is composed of the party’s leader, lifetime members (the party’s cofounders) and appointees, elected representatives, and randomly selected members. It has significant powers enumerated in the party’s constitution, including sole discretion over when and where to field election candidates; determining when and where to hold party conference, as well as the content of the conference agenda; and determining the timetable and process for party leadership elections (Women’s Equality Party 2016a). There is considerable overlap in membership between the SC and the EC, which also includes the party’s two cofounders, and additional members elected by the SC. In interviews, some activists — especially those who were new to political organizing and party politics — did not feel that this degree of centralization was problematic. Others were more critical of the party’s power structures, comparing it with other more hierarchical mainstream parties: “I was a member of the Labour Party before I joined WEP and I feel like members there had a greater say, which isn’t saying much.”

The party has introduced additional formal rule changes in response to these issues and criticisms. For example, the party has established a Policy Committee that is directly elected by simple majority vote at party conference, encompassing policy spokespeople and “movement builders” to shape the party’s key policy areas. Some members, however, felt that policy was still being driven by staff at the center, with one member of the committee stating that she was given no freedom to help

shape the policy area that she had been elected to lead. Others claimed that policy was still being driven by staff at central HQ, with the Policy Committee expected to promote these policies rather than lead on their development. The party has also introduced term limits for the party leader, although the party's first leadership election did not take place until March 2018, with Sophie Walker acting as appointed leader for the first three years of the party's existence. Although the election was not a close-run race — Walker won with more than 90% of the vote — the contest highlighted divisions within the party over power and decision-making structures, with Walker's opponent, Magda Devas, proposing a 10-point plan to enhance transparency and accountability within WEP's organizational structures.

The party has also responded to decentralizing pressures by creating regional “hubs” that “oversee and coordinate the functioning of local branches in their area.”¹⁴ Yet there is no formal regional representation on the SC or the EC, and the hubs framework falls well short of a fully federal party structure, which was proposed by members of the Scottish branches in 2016 and subsequently defeated by a vote of the party conference. Moreover, despite WEP's espoused commitment to an intersectional feminist ideology (as discussed previously), this is not institutionalized in the party's infrastructure. Indeed, requests for a black women's caucus were initially denied by the party leadership (described as an “own goal” by one activist), and, in contrast to several other U.K. parties, WEP does not set aside reserved seats on its leadership organs for underrepresented or marginalized groups.

Despite these tensions, however, there is some evidence of feminist approaches to organizing — particularly at the branch level, although this remains informalized. As one interviewee expressed, “We keep having to go to HQ who just make decisions without consultation and we've just decided we're going to get on with things here locally.” While branch organizational structure has become more formalized after the adoption of the party's constitution, our initial observations of party meetings in the early days of the party's existence often saw members discussing issues in a horizontal and collective manner in the absence of official leaders. As one activist reflected, “Those first couple of meetings were so exciting, it really felt like we had found our people, we were talking about all the ways in which we could make women's lives better

14. Hubs are formed of local branches in a “designated geographical area” containing at least 500 members.

and how we could do something new and important.” Similarly, another activist recalled the “energy and enthusiasm” in those early months and how many members had told her that they “had never experienced anything like it.”

Local branch meetings have proven to be important sites for feminist discussion, with many engaging in consciousness-raising techniques to explore a range of issues from structural violence to educational inequality — a practice identified in other women’s parties (Dominelli and Jonsdottir 1988; Zaborszky 1987). We witnessed members reflecting on their own personal experiences, encouraging each other to share their stories, and situating their experiences within a wider feminist politics. Older members, especially those who had been active within second-wave feminism, spoke about how this reminded them of their previous activism, while an interview with a woman in her twenties revealed how “transformational” she had found some discussions. We observed similar dynamics at the first party conference in breakout discussions away from the main plenary voting sessions; for example, the start of the workshop on sexual harassment in universities was spent talking through the principles of a consensus-based model of discussion, explicitly drawing on techniques used by the Icelandic women’s party.

CONCLUSION

The establishment of the Women’s Equality Party in the United Kingdom raises important questions about the dynamics of gender, power, and change. As new parties that are explicitly committed to challenging gender power relations, women’s parties provide a lens through which to explore the bounded nature and often contradictory outcomes of institutional innovation and design within established party and political systems. In doing so, they improve our understanding of intraparty and interparty power dynamics, while also contributing to our knowledge of the general and gendered mechanisms of institutional continuity and change.

The small but growing body of research on women’s parties to date has often focused on questions about why these parties emerge and what electoral impact they might have. Our analysis, in contrast, takes a party-centered and feminist institutionalist approach, assessing WEP as a new organization and mapping the formal architecture and informal practices of the party on the ground. Our findings suggest that while some

innovations have been implemented by the party, possibilities for change have been limited, foreclosing opportunities for the party to “do things differently.”

In terms of the party-in-the-electorate, we suggest that WEP can certainly make a distinctive case for their “difference” in terms of their label and ideology. Yet the extent to which the party has been able to position itself as a new voice for gender equality has been constrained by the party’s liberal feminist position and policy platform, as well as the wider electoral and party context in the United Kingdom. Moreover, the party has (at times, uncritically) adopted discursive tactics used by male-dominated political parties in order to establish its distinctiveness, particularly parties of the radical right, though it has attempted to gender these wider discourses and debates.

Our evaluation of the party-as-organization similarly suggests that WEP has taken few risks with regard to its organizational structure. Rule changes and innovations have not always had their intended effect (e.g., with regards to party membership criterion); nor have they necessarily been new (e.g., member involvement in policy development). And while the party remains largely informalized, those formal rules that are on the books have largely been used to consolidate the power of the leadership within a hierarchical party structure.

Our analysis therefore highlights the importance of attending to the gaps between the “rules of the game” within parties and their actual interpretation, enactment, and enforcement on the ground. WEP is not a blank slate but is instead “nested” within a dense institutional environment that includes established electoral systems, party systems, and complex ideas and institutions of political representation. Rather than innovate from scratch, then, WEP has, for the most part, simply replicated discourses, organizational patterns, and structures of existing mainstream and anti-establishment parties. Nevertheless, we do highlight possibilities for creative agency and change, highlighting, for example, the ways in which the “soft spots” between party rules and their implementation have opened up spaces for more horizontal and feminist approaches to party organizing, particularly at the local level.

Our conclusions are, of course, necessarily partial, particularly given WEP’s status as a new party in the early stages of its development. The resignation of leader Sophie Walker provides a critical test for the party’s future. Mandu Reid was appointed as interim leader — the first black political party leader in the United Kingdom — and the party saw its first

councilor elected in the 2019 local elections.¹⁵ However, questions remain about WEP's long-term viability. More broadly, the case of WEP points to both the opportunities and trade-offs of working within institutional and party frameworks to advance women's descriptive and substantive representation and whether alternative channels of mobilization and participation might be more open to feminist concerns.

Elizabeth Evans is Reader in Politics at Goldsmiths University of London: elizabeth.evans@gold.ac.uk; Meryl Kenny is Senior Lecturer in Gender and Politics at the University of Edinburgh: M.Kenny@ed.ac.uk

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15. Kay Wesley was elected as WEP's first councilor to Congleton Town Council in May 2019.

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