

# Women's Parties: A New Party Family

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Women's parties have a unique and important role to play in the representation of women and women's issues and interests. They are neither a new nor a rare phenomenon and have emerged in a variety of contexts across time and space. And yet we know relatively little about them. This article argues that women's parties matter and that the study of women's parties matters. We contend that women's parties constitute a discrete party family; while there is a diverse range of women's parties, they can be viewed as a coherent group with similar origins, ideology, and naming patterns. This article offers the first research framework for the comparative study of women's parties. Building our knowledge of women's parties, we argue, is important for those interested in gender and politics, particularly those concerned with the representation of women's issues and interests.

**Keywords:** Women's parties, women's representation, party families

Women's political parties have emerged in a variety of contexts since women gained the vote, and in some places even before enfranchisement (e.g., the Argentine National Feminist Party presented candidates for national office at least six times before Argentina granted women suffrage in 1947). These parties have likely flown below the radar to date because they tend to be small and often dissipate quickly.

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Yet even when they have not garnered much electoral support, many have had a contagion effect, ensuring that women's issues are taken up by other political parties (Cowell-Meyers 2016). Women's parties can help promote women's voices in the political process by linking women's civil society organizations with formal politics. As highly gendered organizations dominated by women rather than men, they have the potential to improve women's representation and, ultimately, to enhance participation, accountability, legitimacy, and democracy. In short, women's parties matter.

Even though the study of political parties is central to political science (Duverger 1959; Michels 1915; Panebianco 1988) and to women's representation (see, e.g., Kittilson 2006; Kittilson and Tate 2005; Lovenduski 2005; Norris 1997; Wolbrecht 2000), we know relatively little about women's parties. This article, and the rest of the special symposium on women's parties, aims to fill this gap, offering the first attempt at a comparative analysis of women's parties across the world. While the rich case studies in this symposium explore a range of women's parties, this article quantifies the existence of women's parties and theorizes about their commonalities, definitions, and roles. We argue that women's parties can be considered a distinct party family worthy of further analysis because of the role they can play in enhancing women's representation and the inclusiveness of political systems.

Our limited knowledge of women's parties relies on individual case studies (Cowell-Meyers 2011, 2017; Dominelli and Jonsdottir 1988; Evans and Kenny 2019a; Krupavicius and Matonyte 2003; Levin 1999; Racioppi and See 1995; Slater 1995; Zaborszky 1987), with only a couple of comparative analyses (Cowell-Meyers 2016; Ishiyama 2003). To enhance our understanding of women's political parties, we offer the first comprehensive effort to document and analyze women's parties and then propose a comparative research framework for their analysis.

The article proceeds as follows: First, we set out our definition of women's parties and describe our methodology for gathering the comparative data. Second, we offer a sense of how many women's parties exist, mapping women's parties across time and space. Third, we theorize about how and why women's parties constitute a distinct party family type. Finally, we make the case for why women's parties matter. Developing our knowledge and understanding of women's parties, we argue, is important for those interested in gender and politics, particularly those concerned with the representation of women's issues and interests. More broadly, the study of women's parties speaks to the

rich scholarship on political parties, especially debates concerning party emergence, competition, ideology, and issue ownership.

## WHAT IS A WOMEN'S PARTY?

In political science, parties are defined as “political organizations that explicitly recruit candidates to run for office” (Ishiyama 2003, 268); indeed, it is the nomination of candidates for public office that distinguishes parties from other organizations, such as interest groups or social movements (Sartori 1976). Hence, participation in elections, national or subnational, is a key element of a political party, whose primary goal is often to win seats. However, there is no single agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a women's party and how this might differ from our general understanding of political parties. Cowell-Meyers offers the most robust definition in her analysis of European parties: women's parties are “autonomous organizations of or for women that run candidates for elected office” to “advance the volume and range of women's voices in politics” (2016, 4).

Like Cowell-Meyers, we contend that women's parties are organizations whose central and defining purpose is to increase women's political representation. They differ, then, from political parties more broadly, whose principal goal is to recruit and run candidates for office. They are distinct from women's groups or caucuses in other established political parties because gender is the principal organizing strategy and focus of the whole party. And they are distinct from social movements because they register candidates, run for office, and produce election campaign manifestos. They are *intentionally* and *consistently* run by women, meaning that the majority of their members, candidates, staff, and leaders are female, which distinguishes them from political parties that may happen to have women in leadership positions. Finally, they typically define themselves as “women's parties,” rather than as parties that happen to be interested in women's issues, and they typically include either “women” or “feminist” in their party name.

Taking gender as their principal organizational and analytical focus, as well as the adoption of the word “women” in some party names, raises questions about the extent to which women are treated as a homogenous group. In other words, what role does intersectionality play, if any, within women's parties? The recognition of the ways in which our multiple identities intersect and shape our experiences of structural and political

forms of oppression and marginalization (Crenshaw 1990) has had a transformative effect on women's movements around the world (Collins and Bilge 2016). Theoretically, it has influenced how we conceptualize gender by revealing the limitations of gender as a single-axis analytical category (McCall 2008).

## MAPPING WOMEN'S PARTIES

To develop a comprehensive sense of where and when women's parties have emerged, we searched multiple electronic databases of news coverage, including LexisNexis, ProQuest Newsstand, Access World News, Factiva, Google News, and the archives of major newspapers in many countries as well as scholarly databases for references and case studies on women's parties. We also combed Princeton University's Constituency-Level Elections Archive, the Database of Political Institutions, Adam Carr's Election Archive, Dieter Nohlen's Elections Data Handbooks, Dawn Brancati's Global Elections Database, and regional elections databases for Africa, Latin America, and Europe, among other sources.

We used the narrowest framework for identifying women's parties using this method: keyword searches for "woman," "women," "feminist," or "mother" in the party name in the elections databases (and the same words in other languages as appropriate) and "women's party" or "feminist party" in the scholarly and news databases, although we included only parties whose title included "women" or "feminist" in the total counts and graphics. In every instance, we verified the existence of the party through the electoral record to ensure that parties that were founded in principle but either never ran or have not yet run candidates were not included.<sup>1</sup> For example, the U.S. National Women's Party fits the naming scheme but never ran candidates for office.

Once we identified a party, we used the party name to gather data about the party's manifesto, electoral platforms, ideology, history, leadership,

1. The risk with this form of searching is undercounting women's parties that use a different naming scheme but might also be worth including. However, there is not a more promising or consistent methodology. It is also important to note that there are likely regional parties not counted here because they did not run candidates for national office. In some cases, these could be important at the regional level, despite their lack of national campaigning. For example, the Frauenliste Basel in Basel-Stadt, Switzerland, won more than 5% of seats in the cantonal legislature in the 1990s, but the small district magnitude for the canton in the national legislature prevented it from having any national presence.

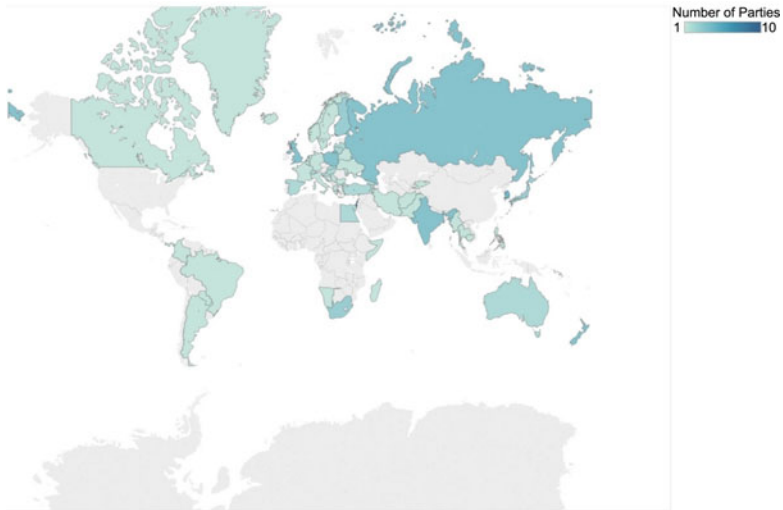


FIGURE 1. Map of women's parties.

electoral outcomes, and linkages with other groups in society, using scholarly and news databases and internet search engines. This allowed us to grasp the commonalities between women's parties and the range of party types.

We found that women's parties are neither a new phenomenon nor a rare one. Instead, we found political parties with "woman"/"women" or "feminist" in their title that register candidates for elections at the national level in almost every region of the world (see Figure 1). They are most common in Europe, where at least 50 have emerged, and least common in Latin America (see Figure 2). Their existence also stretches across most of the history of modern democracy, first appearing in the early twentieth century and in some cases emerging before statehood was consolidated (e.g., Israel) and women's suffrage was practiced (e.g., Argentina's National Feminist Party). They emerged in the greatest numbers in the 1990s: some of this surge is undoubtedly attributable to the breakup of the former Soviet Union and to the dramatic disruption in party systems that accompanied the first set of elections in Eastern Europe and Central Asia after the end of the Cold War (see Figure 3). Curiously, there are some states in which multiple women's parties have emerged, although they are not usually coterminous; rather, earlier women's parties set a precedent for later forms of mobilization (see Figure 1).

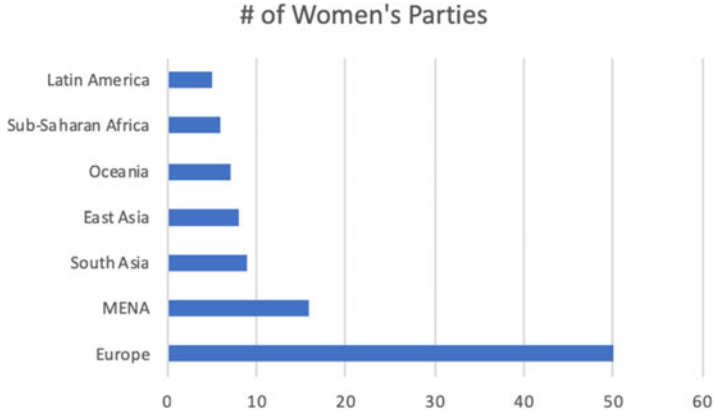


FIGURE 2. Women's parties by region.

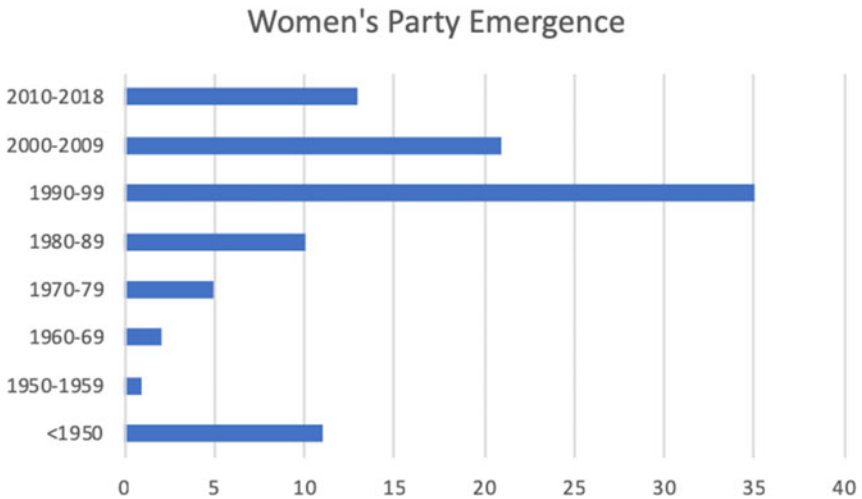


FIGURE 3. Women's party emergence.

Women's parties tend to be small, earning less than 4% of the vote, and thus they secure few parliamentary seats; there are, however, some interesting exceptions to this, such as in Iceland, where Kwenna Listen earned 10% of the vote, and Armenia, where the Shamiram Women's Party attracted 17% of the vote in a single election. The parties also are typically short-lived, although, again, there are examples of women's parties that have greater longevity, including the German Feminist Party,

which campaigned in national and European Union elections for more than 20 years; the Gabriela Women's Party in the Philippines, which has won seats in five congresses; and the Seikatsusha Network (Netto) in Japan (see Shin 2019), which, campaigning at the local level, has had more than 500 deputies elected nationwide in the last two decades.

The number of women's parties that we present is not exhaustive. Indeed, there may be, or previously have been, more women's parties than we uncovered searching only by party name. In fact, pinpointing the total numbers across the globe is virtually impossible, as we encounter the classic problem that absence of evidence is not the same as evidence of absence. In other words, we must approach these figures cautiously. For instance, this decade's numbers do not include recent parties formed in Finland and Denmark, or one that appears to be on the verge of forming in Italy, as these parties have not had the opportunity to run candidates in national elections. Thus, even though it appears there has been a decline in new women's parties emerging recently, the data for this decade almost certainly undercount the total number of parties that will have appeared by 2020. The point, in short, is that women's parties are not disappearing. At least 10 new parties have appeared in every decade since the 1980s; indeed, the phenomenon seems to be spreading across Europe, where new women's parties have emerged in Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, all within the past 12 years.

It is also, of course, extremely difficult to analyze whether the parties, particularly the historical parties, have adopted an intersectional approach to their political recruitment strategies, and in particular whether they have fielded diverse slates of women candidates. Moreover, it is difficult to assess the extent to which they have appealed to a diverse range of voters. The articles in this symposium explore these intersectional dimensions to evaluate the extent to which individual women's parties have approached gender and women as monolithic categories.

## **WOMEN'S PARTIES AS A FAMILY**

From the frequency and scope of women's parties, it is clear that the idea of a women's party holds value as a means and method of political organizing. Women's parties are in some ways distinct from other groups of political parties; as such, we argue, they constitute a separate party family. Despite

the existence of different types of women's parties, we argue that as a group, they share enough points of commonality to be considered a separate and coherent party family.

Party families are the customary way in which scholars of comparative parties describe political parties and understand party competition, particularly in Europe, where the main frameworks for categorizing party families have emerged. The literature on party families is grounded in Stein Rokkan's (1970) classic work on socioeconomic cleavages of the modern era, which links the main parties in Western Europe to different ideological and sociological positions emerging from the cleavages that Rokkan describes (see Von Beyme 1985; Seiler 1980). As Mair and Mudde (1998) explain, scholars tend to assign parties to party families based on either their sociological origins or "genetics" (see Gallagher, Laver, and Mair 1995), transnational organization, ideology and/or policy positions, or party name or self-concept. We argue that women's parties may best be understood as constituting a distinct party family, one with a clear genetic path, ideology, and naming pattern.<sup>2</sup>

The genetics of a party refer to what the party is, based at least partly on how or why it emerged. Parties in the same family are those "that mobilized in similar historical circumstances or with the intention of representing similar interests" (Gallagher, Laver, and Mair 1995, 181). Women's parties tend to have both aspects of this categorization:

- They typically emerge out of the leadership of a women's movement or in close association with a recognizable social movement organization of the women's movement. As movement-party hybrids such as green parties or pro-family parties, they share similar sociological origins.
- Women's parties are typically based upon a *shared group identity*. Gender, along with other identity markers such as race, ethnicity, and sexuality, is a socially constructed characteristic, imbued with distinct social experiences within a structural matrix of oppression (Collins 2000). Marginalized social groups have been oppressed as well as historically excluded from decision-making processes (Young 1990, 2000); therefore, women's parties constitute a political expression of social group politics. However, as we

2. Missing from this analysis is some sort of transnational federation to which women's parties could belong (see Gallagher, Laver, and Mair 1995). Despite the fact that some parties borrow from one another (Norway, Finland, and Denmark's Feminist Initiatives grew out of Sweden's and with its encouragement, Poland's party renamed itself the Feminist Initiative to fit this transnational movement), but there is no such organization, so membership in such an organization is not a usual tool in this case.



note earlier, this tends to be approached on a single axis rather than an intersectional approach.

- They represent similar interests in advancing women's political representation, descriptively, symbolically, and substantively. Though the issues of women's substantive representation differ across country contexts, women's parties almost always have an "explicit agenda to advance the volume and range of women's voices in politics" (Cowell-Meyers 2016, 4). While for some, this is tied explicitly to an intersectional commitment, for others, the focus remains on aggregate numbers.
- The emergence of women's parties is commonly linked to their opposition or reaction to mainstream parties. Within the party family literature, this posture of defiance or opposition is critical in the formation of separate categories of families; social democratic parties emerge in opposition to the bourgeois system, liberals against predemocratic regimes, and so on. Women's parties tend to present themselves as an alternative to established party politics that neglect, or at least are perceived to neglect, women in terms of descriptive and substantive representation. Accordingly, they inextricably link their emergence, and their very existence, to the failure of other parties to include women or give sufficient attention to women's concerns (see Evans and Kenny in this issue). Indeed, it is the *perception* that existing parties have failed to address women's issues sufficiently that is critical, especially when we consider that women's parties have emerged in relatively egalitarian and inclusive Nordic countries (see Cowell-Meyers 2017) as well as in contexts such as the United Kingdom, where mainstream political parties *have* sought to address women's descriptive and substantive representation (Evans and Kenny 2019b).
- Women's parties also commonly evolve in contexts where women have achieved a certain degree of economic advancement, through their labor force participation, but simultaneously lack parallel corresponding political power (see Cowell-Meyers 2016). The discrepancy can be of different degrees (e.g., the Feminist Initiatives in both Sweden and Norway have emerged in contexts where women's descriptive representation is relatively high), but Cowell-Meyers (2016) finds strong statistically significant evidence of these patterns in European states. Most importantly, the theory and narrow empirical evidence suggest that they are not likely to emerge where women have little economic power. They are, instead, products of historical circumstances that empower women unequally across sectors.
- Women's parties are also linked ideologically. Though ideology is often simplified to a left-right positioning, ideology is more appropriately conceived of as "a body of normative or normative-related ideas about the nature of man[kind] and society as well as the organization and purposes of society" (Sainsbury 1980, 8). Commonality of norms and principles creates a spiritual association or ethos across party families (see Von Beyme 1985).

The ideology of women's parties reflects a desire for gender equality, meaning that women and men should have equal citizenship rights, and a pro-women perspective on social justice. These parties demand greater access to power for women and greater inclusion of women in the political sphere.

- Their principal analytical tools center on gender, as opposed to other cleavages (i.e., class, religion, center-periphery, national identity, etc.). While a subset of women's parties are avowedly feminist in the sense of "challenging patriarchy," all women's parties use a gendered analysis, focusing on women's experiences of marginalization and exclusion. For some parties, such as the Feminist Initiative, this focus encompasses an intersectional approach to gender that is missing from the analytical approach of other parties (e.g., the Netto).
- Women's parties can be found on both the left and right of the political spectrum (e.g., the Gabriela Women's Party, the German Feminist Party, and many of the parties discussed in this symposium would categorize themselves as left of center versus the National Party for Hungarian Mothers or the Netto), though they are more commonly left leaning. Some women's parties also pointedly avoid taking stances on typical cleavage issues, such as taxation, monetary policy, or foreign policy (e.g., the U.K. Women's Equality Party), deeming these divisive and a distraction from their core objectives; as such, women's parties offer a "third dimension" outside of traditional class-based or left-right dichotomies (see Kwenna Listen in Iceland).
- Their organizational structures are typically designed to empower women.
  - Often, they are led by women and their primary activists are female. Though they may occasionally run sympathetic male candidates, women's parties usually nominate and campaign exclusively on behalf of female candidates.
  - They typically embrace distinct organizational approaches that aim for consultative leadership, decentralized decision-making and horizontal organization, although there are exceptions to this (Evans and Kenny 2019b).
- Finally, women's parties can be considered a party family in the sense that they tend to self-identify as such through their name or party label. Using party name as a means to access identity is a common mechanism in the scholarship (see Von Beyme 1985) and using this approach for women's parties lacks the weaknesses of doing so for other party families. As Mair and Mudde (1998) note, parties of the left and right have chosen to call themselves a variety of names, and labels such as "liberal" or "people's" conceal diversity among parties using these terms in their self-labeling. However, almost all women's parties use either "women" or "feminist" (more rarely, "mothers") in their party name. (The Netto in Japan is an exception, though its name, "life-maker," clues us in to the primacy of the concept of gender in its self-understanding.)

This list of commonalities across women's parties includes some core features and some typical but not necessary dynamics for membership within the party family. The essential characteristics of parties within this party family are their association with the women's movement, their focus on women's representation, their analytical focus on gender, and their commitment to empowering women through leadership. Consistent with Mair and Mudde (1998), we thus prioritize party origins or genetics and ideology over name or other mechanisms for delimiting the category of women's parties.

Our contention that women's parties should be designated as a party family, like "Christian democratic," "social democrat," or "agrarian" parties, derives not just from the fact that they share commonalities with each other but from the idea that these commonalities distinguish them from mainstream parties that articulate a similar agenda but "do not make the condition of women their primary concern" (Weldon 2002, 80). The essence of women's parties cannot be adequately conceptualized when they are seen as indistinct from established parties or grouped with other left-libertarian parties (see Kitschelt 1988) that do not share their identity or sociological origins. To consider women's parties as a distinct party family is also important because it offers analytical opportunities to evaluate when, how, and why they emerge in comparative contexts; how the fortunes and alliances of the party family evolve over time; and what their emergence reveals about a party system's fragmentation, particularization, and inclusion.

## WHY WOMEN'S PARTIES MATTER

As discussed earlier, women's parties have emerged in a wide variety of contexts across time and space. Given that these parties typically dissolve relatively quickly, regardless of the electoral and party system within which they operate, it is, perhaps, not obvious why we should be interested in them. We argue that women's parties constitute important organizations, and that they are worthy of study for a number of political and sociological reasons:

1. Their emergence tells us about gender and power.
2. Their connections with civil society groups can reveal the strength of women's movements.
3. Their engagement, if any, with intersectionality reveals the extent to which gender is conceived as a single-axis category.
4. They can recruit women to political activism.

5. They can have an impact on both the descriptive and substantive representation of women and women's interests.
6. They provide a visible disruption to the androcentric coding of politician as male.
7. They provide an opposition to the rising backlash to gender equality articulated by populist and far right parties.

We explore these reasons in greater detail next.

Women's parties matter because they tell us something about gender relations and power inequalities within a society. As mentioned earlier, women's parties typically emerge in contexts in which women are unevenly empowered; hence, their emergence within a political system is just one indicator of a society in which men dominate. And, though women do not share equally in political, social, and economic power in any society, women's parties do not emerge everywhere. Political mobilization around gender is thus curious and deserves exploration. When a women's party emerges, it is typically because other parties have failed to take women's issues seriously, or at least there is a *perception* that they have failed to take women's issues seriously. Women's parties are formed because women feel that their voices are not being heard in the decision-making process; this absence is interpreted as a democratic deficit — one that those who form women's parties believe existing parties are incapable of addressing. For example, Kwenna Frambothid and Kwenna Listen emerged because of a sense of anger regarding the absence of women in Iceland's social power base (Dominelli and Jonsdottir 1988).

Even given a perception that the party system is neglecting women's issues, this only fulfils the demand side of the equation; women's parties do not emerge without the availability of supply-side actors. Women's parties typically emerge alongside or out of women's movement politics, making them, in theory, more accountable and directly related to grassroots activism. These origins are important and can have a particular impact on the ways in which women's parties do politics. When a women's party emerges, it can tell us something about the relative strength of the women's movement in a given context. Setting up a political party and running for office require significant resources, in terms of attracting sufficient numbers of activists as well as ample material resources. Therefore, if a women's party emerges, it could be read as an indicator that there is also likely to be an active women's movement. For instance, the Canadian Feminist Party was established by

activists to work in cooperation with the various women's groups, associations, and coalitions to challenge the political systems and structures that were designed by men for men (Zaborszky 1987).

Women's parties are important symbolically in terms of what they can reveal about the conceptualization of gender. After all, in some cases, women's parties could be the sole political actors discussing gender and women's issues. The extent to which they engage with intersectionality, which has heralded a paradigmatic shift in our understanding of identity and power (Hancock 2007), tells us about the extent to which they are engaged in pursuing a politics that recognizes the importance of diversity among and between women. Indeed, who they recruit to stand as candidates, who their members are, and the extent to which they try to appeal to a diverse range of women is critical in terms of their ability to claim to be able to represent all women. Indeed, some parties have struggled with the idea of intersectionality (see Evans and Kenny in this issue), a struggle that can be driven both by a failure to recognize the importance of differences between women and by a belief that the term women will automatically appeal to all women. This has important implications because if a women's party does not acknowledge difference, then it may dissuade other parties from adopting a more intersectional approach.

Women's parties matter because they have an impact. While it is rare that women's parties achieve much by way of electoral success, they are able to influence the agendas of existing political parties, especially with regard to the descriptive representation of women and the substantive representation of women's issues and interests. While they are able to have a contagion effect through their presence in tight electoral races, they are typically best placed to influence other parties by raising the agenda of women's issues in order to embarrass existing parties into taking up the issue of women's representation and specific policy issues. For instance, the Israeli Women's Party, founded in 1977, claimed that influencing the election manifestos and campaigns of existing parties was one of their primary goals (Levin 1999). Moreover, Cowell-Meyers's (2011, 2014, 2017) work demonstrates that in Northern Ireland and Sweden, the emergence of women's parties changed the election platforms and public statements of the mainstream parties.

Women's parties have the potential to disrupt androcentric images of politics through the promotion of women candidates and women legislators. Challenging gendered perceptions surrounding the role of a politician, women's parties have an important role to play in

demonstrating that women also “do politics.”<sup>3</sup> Women forming their own party sends a message to other women that politics is not just an activity for men, and that, in turn, has the *potential* to encourage other women to run for office. It also places pressure on mainstream parties to position women more visibly in their campaigns, run female candidates, and run them in winnable seats. For example, according to news coverage at the time, the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (NIWC) “sent the other parties scrambling for women within their ranks to push in front of the cameras” (Haughey 1997). As Cowell-Meyers (2011, 14) demonstrates, the emergence of the NIWC contributed to increases in the number of and seriousness of female candidates in local and parliamentary elections. As Shin explains in this issue, the Japanese Netto uses a reconceptualization of politics to recruit women in local communities; adopting a rotation rule and term limits for the delegates, the party engages women who would normally think of themselves as far from “professional politics,” putting forward, in contrast, an “amateur politics” and altering the boundaries of the political.

In addition to encouraging other women to run for office, women’s parties can also perform an educative function by introducing women to politics and to political activism. In contexts in which politics is explicitly coded as a male activity, levels of political knowledge among women might be expected to be lower, given that they are either formally or informally excluded from the political process. Women’s parties can provide an introduction to politics, especially to women with lower levels of educational attainment or with little knowledge or experience of the political process. For instance, women were more likely than men to vote for the Women for Russia Party, which was particularly attractive to younger, less educated women (Ishiyama 2003). Some women’s parties also have explicit agendas to rethink the boundaries of the political and engage women in the political process through nontraditional pathways. Kwenna Frambothid in Iceland, for example, used theater, visual arts, economic exchange, and its public services around rape and domestic violence to engage women in their network (see Alla Kristin Einarsdottir’s 2015 documentary *The Kitchen Sink Revolution*). The Netto also used the unusual pathway of collective bargaining around environmentally friendly household products to link women to formal politics.

3. Of course, the extent to which women’s party spokespeople are given any visibility is dependent on the media and whether they are provided a public platform.

Finally, we argue that in a context in which populist and far-right parties are on the rise, coupled with a backlash against gender equality policies (Verloo 2018), women's parties have a particularly important role to play in contesting anti-women narratives. The fact that they are political parties matters. Parties, as legal entities, have institutional resources that movements do not. They are able to formally contest discourse, ideas, and policies through the production of election manifestos, during debates, and through the media's coverage of elections. Their status as a party gives them a platform from which they can directly challenge those who seek to promote regressive policies that will be harmful for women and other minority groups. The translation of social movement politics into party politics offers a critical means by which to champion issues that matter to women.

In this section, we have made the case for studying women's parties as important gendered organizations. However, while we can note the achievements of individual parties, how do we conceive of them in terms of comparative research? We now turn our attention to the idea of women's parties as a distinct party family, an approach that allows us to undertake more systematic comparative research. Moreover, the adoption and adaptation of this framework will allow us to promote the study of women's parties among party scholars and those interested in gender and politics who have hitherto largely neglected their existence.

## THEMATIC OVERVIEW

In this article, we have explored the study of women's political parties. We have reflected on what constitutes a women's party, mapped the prevalence of women's parties across time and space, set out the case for considering them as a distinct party family, and explained why they are important organizations worthy of study. In this final section of the article, we draw out some of the thematic questions that arise from the case studies included in this symposium of *Politics & Gender*. The articles touch on ideas we have explored here and raise six important conceptual, empirical, and methodological challenges for understanding women's political parties: How do we distinguish between different types of women's parties? What role do, and should, men play in women's parties? How should we study women's parties? How intersectional are women's parties? Are women's parties effective? Do women's parties operate differently to other types of parties? Finally, we add to

the questions raised in the articles by asking why women's parties are so short-lived, arguing that to understand their emergence, organization, and impact, it is necessary to understand the conditions in which they dissipate.

### **How Do We Distinguish between Different Types of Women's Parties?**

All three of the articles in this special symposium grapple with the question of how we classify and understand women's parties, and offer alternative frameworks for distinguishing among types of women's parties. Ki-young Shin offers a six-part framework for conceptualizing women's parties, depending on their approach to the descriptive and substantive representation of women. Kimberly Cowell-Meyers explores the importance of understanding women's parties as part of the women's movement, while Elizabeth Evans and Meryl Kenny distinguish between women's parties and feminist parties. We suggest that these approaches provide a set of important typological questions that should be considered as complementary to our party family framework, allowing scholars to interrogate the aims and objectives of women's parties at the national level.

### **What Role Do Men Play in Women's Parties?**

As the name "women's party" suggests, women tend to be the dominant group within these parties; however, none of the women's parties that we are aware of have a rule explicitly excluding men. Indeed, men have stood as candidates on behalf of the U.K. Women's Equality Party (Evans and Kenny), while in Japan some Nettos have selected male candidates to "expand their constituency and break with their images of housewife party" (Shin).

The inclusion of men as candidates and organizers, however, raises fundamental questions for women's parties regarding their commitment to women's descriptive representation, especially if male candidates are selected to run against incumbent women. Future research exploring the role of men within women's parties will allow us to consider in greater depth the gender dynamics at play within these organizations. Moreover, political parties in which men constitute the underrepresented group will allow us to explore the applicability of dominant theoretical frameworks for analyzing gender and political parties.



## **Which Literatures Should We Use to Study Women's Parties?**

The articles in this symposium adopt a number of different conceptual frameworks, all of which tease out distinct and overlapping questions concerning the organization and impact of women's parties. The frameworks are drawn from across varied literatures, including political recruitment and election analysis (Shin), social movement analysis (Cowell-Meyers), and feminist institutionalism (Evans and Kenny). The range of frameworks that can be applied to the study of women's parties reinforces our argument that they hold significance for scholars working across the discipline, in particular, their role as linkages between civil society movements and formal political institutions speaks to an important research agenda regarding the politics of representation, accountability, and democracy.

## **How Intersectional Are Women's Parties?**

As we argue earlier, for a party to be considered a women's party, it must take gender to be its primary analytical category. However, given the turn toward intersectionality — the recognition that gender intersects with other identities such as race, class, or disability — the question of how seriously women's parties take the issue of intersectionality is critical. All of the articles in this symposium consider the formal and informal ways in which intersectionality shapes party policies and political recruitment processes. Some women's parties have been especially assiduous in ensuring that they reach out to a diverse range of women; for instance, the Swiss FraP! (Frauen Macht Politik) deliberately aimed to make politics accessible for women who were marginalized (Cowell-Meyers). Conversely, other women's parties are dominated by middle-class women and so struggle to appear representative of all women (Evans and Kenny; Shin). An intersectional approach is not, we argue, an essential criterion for being considered a women's party; rather the adoption, or otherwise, of an intersectional strategy reveals something about that party's approach to representation as well as their engagement with feminist praxis.

## **Are Women's Parties Effective?**

Measuring the effectiveness of women's parties is difficult, not least because not all women's parties view gaining seats in a national legislature as their

primary goal. Instead, some women's parties seek to influence other parties, by forcing them to engage with women's issues and encouraging (and shaming them into) selecting more women candidates. Indeed, two articles explore the idea of contagion and how women's parties can influence the agenda of the other parties (Cowell-Meyers; Shin). Meanwhile, analysis of other women's parties reveals the tension that can arise as a result of a new women's party emerging, especially among parties that already considered themselves to be progressive with regard to women's descriptive and substantive representation (Evans and Kenny).

We argue that exploring whether women's parties are effective requires a more nuanced analysis than simply looking at vote share or electoral gains. Acknowledging that the work of women's parties often goes unnoticed means that researchers should seek to analyze how they interact with other parties and the processes by which women's issues and interests are taken up and championed by other parties.

### **Do Women's Parties Behave Differently?**

As noted earlier, women's parties tend to behave differently than other male-dominated parties; however, there are exceptions to this. Indeed, two pieces in this symposium highlight how women's parties have sought to avoid replicating typical structures found in other parties (Cowell-Meyers; Shin). Offering a distinctive style of politics is something that a party might embrace in terms of a discursive strategy but that is not always supported by organizational innovations (Evans and Kenny). Conversely, the Japanese Netto has adopted several distinctive features that mark it out as different from male-dominated parties, including rotation, terms limits, salary donation, and a culture of volunteerism (Shin). While women's parties tend to have a common story in terms of emergence, analytical approach, and ideology, the case studies in this special symposium reveal a wide variety of organizational approaches that do not necessarily reflect feminist or horizontal approaches to organizing.

### **Why Are Women's Parties Short-Lived?**

The literature on women's parties reveals that they tend to be short-lived. We suggest that future research on women's parties should explore the transitory nature of women's parties, in particular exploring whether their electoral performance is determinative of their ability to survive. The

question of their survival is, we argue, critical to understanding the context within which they emerge. Analysis of the demise of a women's party is as important as exploring their emergence. Do women's parties expire because they are not (solely) interested in winning elections? Is their extinction a result of being underresourced? Do tensions arise with women's movement actors or with other political parties? Are there internal dynamics that make the party unsustainable? Do women's parties have such a significant impact on other parties that they are no longer needed? All of these questions are important to understanding not only women's parties but also wider debates concerning party organization, impact, and competition.

## CONCLUSION

This symposium is dedicated to the study of women's parties for two compelling reasons: (1) women's parties matter, and (2) they have hitherto been neglected. Though typically short-lived, with low levels of electoral success, women's parties have the potential to enhance women's representation in a number of ways: by recruiting women into politics, by pressuring established parties to address women's underrepresentation, and by shifting the perception of politics as an activity coded as male. They also have the potential to resist and contest the anti-gender equality rhetoric of traditionalist populist movements. Studying women's parties is important because their emergence typically reflects a perception that mainstream parties are failing women; moreover, their presence also indicates the presence of an active women's movement.

As we have demonstrated, women's parties have existed in many contexts and over many decades. They have emerged at different times in all regions of the world, though they are most common in Europe, where electoral systems have facilitated the growth of new and smaller parties. Most have had very limited electoral success although some have shown remarkable durability and there is evidence that some have had a profound impact on women's representation. They also appear to be a growing phenomenon in Europe, where women's parties have emerged in five countries over the past decade.

Given the importance of women's parties, this article and the case studies that follow begin to set out a comparative research agenda. First and foremost, we contend that women's parties qualify as a distinct party

family, separate from other party families, because of their unique sociological origins and their ideology, as well as their naming pattern. Thus, they are a distinct phenomenon in the study of parties and politics in general. Employing the analytical framework of the party family provides a means by which to analyze when, how, and why women's parties emerge across time and space. Viewing them as a coherent party family allows us to compare how they behave over time and how their emergence reflects the state of party systems in terms of inclusivity, fragmentation, and particularization. Additionally, the party family label allows us to undertake rigorous comparative analyses, for instance, by comparing party manifestos and election platforms.

However, the use of gender as a central analytical and organizational approach raises questions regarding the extent to which they are engaged with intersectionality and whether they are interested in advancing the representation of *all* women. This question is significant in terms of how the parties approach gender and their potential to shape national conversations about gender and women's representation, especially during election campaigns.

The case studies included in this symposium also raise key questions about how women's parties relate to central dynamics of women's mobilization: Which theoretical lens should we use to study them? What dimensions of women's parties are central to their definition? Do they organize themselves in some distinct way? How should we evaluate their efficacy? To what extent do they intersect with mobilizations of other groups in society? And what role should men play in the party? We propose a further dimension of their analysis focusing on why they tend to be short-lived and whether survival is critical to their impact.

This article and the case studies included in this symposium center on documenting diverse cases of women's parties organized in different contexts and creating a novel framework for evaluating this fascinating phenomenon. We are enormously proud to offer them to you.

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