

## A Feminist Approach to Quotas and Comparative Politics

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Mainstream comparative politics (CP) rarely attends to gender scholarship. Conventional wisdom urges gender scholars to speak to the broader concerns of CP to avoid this marginalization. But feminist concerns are broader than those of CP. Feminism promotes changes in power relations to advance “justice for women and everyone” and offers tools for assessing injustice (Weldon 2011, 443). In contrast, CP promotes stability and order that benefits elites; it values predictive models over usefulness (Clarke and Primo 2012). How can feminist quota scholars address their broader concerns and speak to CP? I argue that we need to lead with feminism. Doing so not only ensures that our work will address broader concerns, but also ensures that we will have insights to offer CP that demonstrate the value of feminist analysis. Leading with feminism, I evaluate whether legislative quotas for women change the political dynamics sustaining gender injustice. I find that they rarely do so. I then draw on feminist quota scholarship to highlight the limits of CP toward democracy and institutional change to demonstrate the value of feminist analysis. I conclude with suggestions on how to advance a feminist agenda in the discipline.

### GHETTOIZATION

“I propose that it is ontologically impossible *not* to have a gender perspective: It is implicit in all domains of academic inquiry.” So Htun argued in the first issue of *Politics & Gender* (2005, 162; italics in original). Yet political scientists have not embraced this claim. Tripp, for example, points to the invisibility of gender in the APSA *Task Force on Difference and Inequality in the Developing World*, a telling oversight, given the gendered nature of global poverty (2010, 194). Although prominent women were on that committee, their presence did not ensure a gender perspective.

Integrating feminism in the discipline is an even greater challenge than integrating gender. Feminism endorses an emancipatory agenda and offers

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valuable analytical tools, such as knowledge is situated, politics is everywhere, and context is critical. Driscoll and Krook argue that a feminist perspective is “essential for devising accurate empirical accounts of gender quota reform” (2012, 16). Nonetheless, mainstream political science does not value feminism: It creates a false trade-off between rigorous research and feminism, pressuring scholars to downplay the latter. This pressure is mounting as mainstream scholars enter the field, bringing new methodological tools but not a feminist perspective. Feminist quota scholars thus need to maintain their broader concerns, resist false trade-offs, and speak to CP. We can do all three by leading with feminism.

## QUOTAS AND GENDER JUSTICE

Quota scholars can pursue broader concerns by investigating whether quotas advance gender justice. Gender refers to how individual attitudes and behaviors, institutions, and structures produce and reproduce inequalities of power based on mainstream understandings of sex. Gendered processes target “women and everyone” who deviate from hegemonic man, limiting their participation in making the rules that govern their lives, undervaluing their labor, and constraining their autonomy (Young 1990). Do quotas alter the political dynamics that produce and reproduce gender injustice?

Quotas have the potential to advance gender justice by improving women’s representation. Yet research does not confirm that quotas do so consistently. Occasionally, quotas reduce women’s domination through their symbolic effects. Some scholars find that quotas undermine stereotypes justifying women’s exclusion from leadership and encourage their political participation (Beaman et al. 2009; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2010). Where quotas are perceived as attacking merit, however, they can fuel a backlash (Meir 2012). Across a range of countries, researchers have found that quotas sometimes encourage women’s political participation (Kittelson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012), and sometimes they do not (Zetterberg 2012). Discriminatory attitudes toward women in politics and toward gender issues persist (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012). Although quotas sometimes advance gender justice by undermining sexist attitudes, more research is needed to confirm when and why.

Quotas appear better positioned to undermine women’s domination in political parties and the legislature, as they directly alter electoral

procedures. When quotas increase women's descriptive representation, they expand the political opportunities of party loyalists (Baldez 2006; O'Brien 2012). By this measure, quotas diminish domination by bringing a few women into the halls of power. This limited effect sometimes facilitates substantive representation in policy making. Quotas have the potential to reduce domination indirectly in the legislature by providing sufficient numbers of women for a caucus. Women who want to increase their effectiveness can rally others on the basis of their shared priorities (Weldon 2011, 442), for example, by requesting an end to meetings that extend into the dinner hour or by establishing gender committees.

Altered institutional practices make it easier for women to put new issues on the legislative agenda and to involve new actors from civil society (Goetz and Hassim 2002; Walsh 2012). Quotas do not guarantee that these challenges will succeed, but they can facilitate them. Yet these reforms often have limits and are short lived. Party divisions among women stymie their sustained activism; powerful political bosses co-opt or reverse practices that threaten their control (Paxton and Hughes 2007; Walsh 2012). Moreover, although women are more likely to introduce and sponsor bills associated with women's issues (Schwindt-Bayer 2006; Swers 2002), one or two legislators usually become "critical actors" advancing these issues. Indeed, even where institutional obstacles are high and quotas absent, one or two critical actors can alter policymaking dynamics (Childs and Krook 2009). Thus, quotas are not necessary for substantive representation in policymaking.

Feminists most prize substantive representation that results in policy change, as it has the greatest potential to redress injustice throughout society.<sup>1</sup> Yet as Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo admit, quotas "have rarely altered policy outcomes" (2012, 12). Further, quotas rarely alter the political dynamics that *do* enhance policy passage, such as strong women's movements, open and inclusive debate, effective women's policy agencies, or international pressure (Walsh 2011; Waylen 2007). Where quotas have been associated with substantive representation as policy change, democratic institutions are weak (Hassim 2009). In South Africa, quotas ensured women's participation in negotiations over the constitution and in the first parliament that helped secure a gender equality clause and women's rights legislation. But party elites soon used

1. Implemented laws may not advance gender justice, but they do advance knowledge about how to do so. If passed but not implemented, then they offer a strong basis for claims-making.

the quota to pack parliament with loyalists, co-opt the gender agenda, and stymie advances in women's rights (Walsh 2012). A similar pattern emerged in Uganda (Goetz and Hassim 2002). In Peru and Rwanda, "quota women" supported authoritarian rulers who used women's rights to distract international attention from civil and political rights violations (Blondet 2002; Longman 2005). In these cases, political elites used quotas to signal a commitment to inclusionary democracy that did not exist. Hence, quotas rarely disrupt the political dynamics that produce and reproduce gender injustice.

Moreover, as Chappell observes, "the rewards ... have been incommensurate with the effort needed to enter Parliament" (2002, 173). These are important findings for advocates of gender justice. Quotas may be cheap politics for elites projecting the illusion of inclusion, but they are not cheap for feminists with scarce time and resources. Activists would do better to focus on building strong, autonomous women's movements within and across institutions that can support women's policy agencies, broaden the content of public debate, and pressure political elites to comply with international standards. Feminist scholarship can assist this effort by analyzing the passage and implementation of policies that undermine injustice.

## SPEAKING TO CP

By leading with feminism, quota scholars also can expose the narrowness of CP and convey the value of feminist tools. Feminist quota scholarship reveals the low quality of democracy within democratic institutions and how those institutions thwart efforts to become inclusive. Indeed, CP scholars rarely investigate how parties or legislatures sustain "oligarchy" (Pitkin 2004).

CP scholars define democracy as free and fair competitive elections accompanied by individual civil rights (Diamond and Gunther 2001). To prevent a slide into authoritarianism, they insist that political parties guard "the interests of socioeconomic elites," discipline legislatures, and "provide the foundation for a democratic political class" that excludes "amateur or 'outsider' politicians" (Levitsky and Cameron 2003, 3–4). In contrast, feminist quota scholars highlight how these functions obstruct women's entry, constrain their effectiveness, and block legislation that attacks injustice. Feminist research thus reveals the exclusionary limits supported by CP.

Those limits may explain why political parties are declining in popular support, why new democracies have meager levels of legitimacy, and why established democracies face citizen apathy (Diamond and Gunther 2001) and — more recently — protest. Indeed, CP scholars increasingly address the quality of democracy: They add participation to their definition and recommend that citizens join competitive political parties (Roberts 2010). Yet political parties are not internally participatory. On the contrary, feminist quota scholarship details how political parties subvert efforts to reform them. As Baldez quips, quotas “introduce new players to the political arena but make them play according to old rules” (2006, 106).

Although informal “old rules” have been at the “margins” of political science (Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 725), they have long been at the center of feminist analysis (Acker 1992). By attending to how knowledge is situated, to context, and by expanding the definition of the political, feminist scholars identify “what drives political behavior” and “explain important political phenomena” (Hawkesworth 2003, 546). For example, Hawkesworth’s work on U.S. Congresswomen of color details how colleagues dominate them through “silencing, stereotyping, enforced invisibility, exclusion [and] marginalization,” blocking their input on welfare policy reform (2003, 546). Feminist research thus confirms that informal rules limit democratic quality and that presence is not enough to challenge gender injustice.

Informal rules operate in political science as well. Research suggests that to challenge our marginalization, we will need to do more than attend to our scholarship. We will need to build strong, autonomous women’s organizations within the profession, our departments, and home institutions that can support women’s policy agencies, broaden the content of debate, and pressure our colleagues to comply with best practices. In short, we will need to lead with feminism in word and deed.

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