

The Gender Lacuna in Comparative Politics

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What accounts for the glaring inattention to work on gender within mainstream political science? Part of the problem lies in the substance of scholarship itself. The concepts, central questions, and key variables that predominate in the mainstream literature on comparative democratization and in the literature on gender and democratization have contributed to the gulf between them. But a more fundamental explanation lies in the starting assumptions of scholars in the two camps. Mainstream scholars rarely question whether gender is relevant to politics, and gender scholars rarely question whether gender *isn't* relevant to politics. I illustrate some ways in which gender could be incorporated into mainstream work, and discuss how gender research could be made more broadly comparative.

Research on gender and politics has now become a legitimate field of research within political science. Scholars who focus on women and gender work full time at the top colleges and universities in the world. The Organized Section on Women and Politics is one of the American Political Science Association's largest research sections. The new journal, *Politics & Gender*, is published by one of the top presses in the discipline (Cambridge University Press) and is in its sixth year of production. Political science now boasts three peer-reviewed journals that focus exclusively on women and gender, along with *International Feminist Journal of Politics* and *The Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*. Articles on women or gender now regularly appear in highly-ranked journals such as *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science* and *Journal of Politics*. As Sue Tolleson-Rinehart and Sue Carroll note, in the past couple of decades "gender-related scholarship has become more insti-

tutionalized, and women and politics has become more securely entrenched as an enduring subfield within political science."¹

Research on gender is no longer marginalized, but it remains separate from mainstream political science. Most political science continues to be conducted as though gender is not relevant to politics. A dichotomy between gender politics and political science cuts through all the major subfields in the discipline. We might well expect gender to be more widely accepted within the comparative subfield, given, as Karen Beckwith notes, "[its] longstanding concern with issues of culture, cultural difference, values, attitudes and beliefs."² Gender warrants barely a mention in two recent and ostensibly comprehensive volumes, Carlos Boix and Susan Stokes' *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics* and Gerardo Munck and Richard Snyder's *Passion, Craft and Method in Comparative Politics*.³ The 2009 edition of Mark Lichbach and Alan Zuckerman's *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture and Structure* provides more examples of research on women and gender than the original 1997 edition, but does not consider gender analysis to be a legitimate theoretical approach.⁴

The gender lacuna is perhaps most notable in research on democratization. Hundreds of books and articles on gender and democratization in every region of the world have been published in the past twenty years but, as Georgina Waylen maintains, "the mainstream democratization literature has remained largely gender-blind, with very little to say about the participation of women in transitions to democracy or the gendered nature of those processes."⁵ Of the ten most frequently cited articles on democratization published in political science journals since 1990, not one mentions women or gender, or cites work on

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women or gender.⁶ Of numerous review essays published on democratization in the top journals since 1989, not one mentions or cites any research on women or gender, despite comprehensive-sounding titles such as “What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?” and “Rethinking Recent Democratization.”⁷ These observations are nothing new; in fact, the exclusion of women and gender from the research on democratization is what created the field of gender and democracy in the first place. All studies of gender and democracy begin by noting the puzzling inattention of political science research to the participation of women, or lack thereof, in the transition process. Nonetheless, framing research on gender in terms of the mainstream literature has not met with equal attention from the other side.

This essay seeks to explain the gender lacuna within mainstream comparative politics research and to make the case for integration. Part of the problem lies in the substance of scholarship itself. The concepts, central questions, and key variables on which the two approaches rely have contributed to the gulf between them. But a more fundamental explanation lies in the starting assumptions of scholars in the two camps. Mainstream scholars rarely question whether gender is relevant to politics, and gender scholars rarely question whether gender *isn't* relevant to politics. From the perspective of mainstream scholars, existing apart is not unique to gender politics, and it is not necessarily problematic. Other subfields—social movements, qualitative methods, and presidency research, for example—complain about their marginality from a perceived “mainstream” too. Women are but one constituency of political claimants among many and gender is but one variable among many (i.e., “race, gender, ethnicity, etc.”). From the perspective of gender scholars, gender is different because gender is constitutive of politics. It is central to politics in the same way race or class is central. As historian Joan W. Scott writes, “gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power . . . [and] it seems to have been a persistent and recurrent way of enabling the signification of power in the West, in Judeo-Christian as well as Islamic traditions.”⁸ From this perspective, a science of politics that does not apprehend the relationship between gender and power is missing something central to political life. Failing to consider gender as a valid category of analysis risks presenting—and sustaining—an incomplete and inaccurate view of the political world. Similarly, scholars of gender who do not avail themselves of the full range of tools in political science limit their ability to understand and to explain the world.

Not all gender scholars view integration with mainstream political science as a desirable goal. Marysia Zalewski argues that mainstreaming leads to “critical atrophy” within gender work.⁹ Judith Squires and Jutta Weldes warn that accepting the agenda already set by a mainstream center will sustain the marginality of gender scholarship.¹⁰ Oth-

ers simply do not want to dedicate their limited time to the additional project of educating people about the importance of gender. To put it in the vernacular: “if people choose to ignore work on gender, that’s their problem.” Others explain the separation between gender and mainstream work as the result of old-fashioned sexism, but I don’t think it’s that simple. Many mainstream scholars, including many women, are exemplary feminists in other areas of their professional careers and private lives. Whether someone holds one or the other perspective may come down to life experiences or personal choice—something that is beyond the scope of this essay. Regardless, however, the lack of integration of the two fields limits our ability to understand some of the major problems that plague the world today.

I envision a comparative politics of gender as an approach that integrates gender politics and political science more closely. Integration requires two things. The first is attention to the ways that the key terms, concepts, and variables used in the two fields have kept “democratization” separate from “women and gender.” Such methodological considerations are pretty standard fare in bridging distinct literatures. The second is for both mainstream and gender scholars to be more open-minded. Mainstream scholars must take seriously the exclusion of women from research on the process of democratic transition. They must consider gender analysis as a valid theoretical approach, one among many competing explanations for political phenomena. Gender scholars must subject the idea that women have a distinctive relationship to the political arena to systematic empirical scrutiny. One way to do this is to make gender work more broadly comparative, by comparing women to other collective political actors and by defining variables in ways that facilitate cross-national comparison.

Considering Gender in the Mainstream Literature on Comparative Democratization

Two characteristics of the mainstream literature on democratization prove particularly problematic for the incorporation of women and gender: a narrow definition of what constitutes democratization and an elite focus.¹¹ Democracy may be an essentially contested concept, but the comparative democratization literature tends to define it in a narrow way that impedes recognition of the relevance of gender. Comparative studies of democratization conceive of transition as “one date, frequently indicated with great precision, on which whole cases cross the threshold from nondemocratic to democratic regime.”¹² Defining democracy as a dichotomous variable does not necessarily present a problem from a gender perspective—unless scholars count as democratic those regimes in which women do not enjoy full citizenship rights. Some studies identify regimes that

exclude women as democratic. One of the most widely read comparative historical studies of democratization justifies this on the strange grounds that “vastly less blood was shed” during battles for women’s suffrage.¹³ Studies of democratization tend to presume that countries evolve toward greater democracy over time. From this perspective, limited suffrage is merely a temporary oversight that reflects the unenlightened biases of an earlier age. The history of women’s suffrage shows us that politicians explicitly and pointedly excluded women from the franchise, refusing to acknowledge decades-long campaigns by women who demanded the vote. Given that women make up 50 percent of the world’s population, this is an unacceptable omission. We cannot consider a regime to be democratic if women are not fully incorporated as citizens.

Narrow definitions of democracy facilitate comparison, but significantly reduce the scope of what about democracy is worth explaining. They eliminate from consideration the main dependent variables addressed within the gender and democratization literature: the level of women’s political participation, the mobilization of women against authoritarianism, and the adoption and implementation of women-friendly policies. An elite focus may prevent us from seeing what it is that women do in transitions to democracy, but it should not prevent us from asking why most political elites are men. At this point in history, “no women” should prompt the immediate raising of red flags. As Teri Caraway reminds us, “Gender, defined as the social organization of sexual difference, includes both men and women. The absence of women in the definition of [a] dependent variable, then does not mean that gender played no role in episodes of democratization that enfranchised men.”¹⁴

Even elite-centered analyses could incorporate a gender perspective. One approach would examine the processes by which certain actors and not others become political elites. Non-gender approaches to democratization focus primarily on those who participate in the transition process, ignoring those who do not and failing to question why others are excluded from the transition process. A gender approach would take seriously Munck’s suggestion that we “recast the issue of which actors are relevant to the consolidation of democracy as an empirical question,” rather than assuming which elites are relevant a priori.¹⁵ Why most politicians are men is the central question of the vast literature on women’s political representation, but perhaps a shift in focus would make the connection to democratization more clear. We might ask, for example, what kinds of leaders do people support in the context of a democratic transition, and why? Where military regimes have highlighted the salience of masculine identity, one might expect that voters would be more likely to vote for women as political leaders, expecting that women will prioritize caring and healing over conflict. Why isn’t this the case?

A second approach focuses on how women’s mobilization shapes elite views. Elite-based explanations of democratic transition seldom discuss the conditions that lead elites to reform, but gender may be relevant to the way factional struggles are waged and won. As Valerie Bunce argues, elites make decisions in response to perceived levels of popular support.¹⁶ In a transition context, popular support is often demonstrated through mass mobilization, which in turn is where women are more likely to participate, as scores of studies on women’s movements have shown. A gendered analysis of elites might move the locus of analysis back in time to explain the kinds of conflicts or issues that prompt a response from authoritarian leaders. Where transitions emerge as the result of elite pacts, what motivates authoritarian elites to sit down at the negotiating table in the first place? To what extent does mass mobilization prompt them to consider reform? If so, do women play a key role in organizing dissent? If we connect elite decision-making to mobilization, we can better see how women influence the transition process.

Research by Margaret Power, as well as my own work, demonstrates that the mobilization of women in Chile decreased the costs of regime change by reframing the political situation in gendered terms. In Allende’s Chile, women mobilized popular support for a military coup by appealing to women’s traditional roles, banging on empty pots and pans to symbolize how socialism threatened the family. By pointedly challenging the masculinity of the armed forces and of opposition politicians, women’s mobilization made the decision to intervene seem inevitable.¹⁷ Later, the mobilization of women *against* the Chilean military helped ordinary people to conquer their fears of speaking out against the dictatorship, prompted male politicians to overcome their partisan differences, and ultimately provided the mass support the opposition needed to oust the Pinochet government. In both of these cases, women mobilized ordinary citizens against the existing regime by presenting themselves as apolitical or nonpartisan and thus less dangerous than men. Male political elites co-opted these efforts to strengthen their efforts to negotiate with their opponents.

M. Steven Fish’s study of the impact of Muslim religion on democratization exemplifies what I mean by integration. His article “Islam and Authoritarianism” not only considers women as an independent variable, but it finds that the status of women best explains low levels of democracy in Islamic countries. Specifically, lower literacy rates for women, sex ratios that favor men, and low percentages of women in political office “link Islam and the democratic deficit.”¹⁸ Fish’s study is not without flaws, as Daniela Donno and Bruce Russett showed pointedly in a retest of the original study two years later.¹⁹ But their follow-up underscores the importance of the topic and the urgency of understanding this pressing political problem.

Allow me to suggest another follow-up to Fish's article that would employ gender (rather than women) as an explanatory variable. Fish's analysis relies on various measures of the status of women. A gender analysis of "Islam and Authoritarianism" would consider how conceptions of male/female difference became politically relevant in the first place. As Karen Beckwith and I wrote in the inaugural issue of *Politics & Gender*, "scholarship on women and politics focuses primarily on women. It accepts the existence of women as an established social category . . . [while] research on gender examines the ways in which politics shapes, and is shaped by, differences between men and women."²⁰

Fish muses that if the subordination of women is innate to Muslim culture, then it may be that poor treatment of women may cause authoritarian regimes, rather than the other way around. The problem is that the subordination of women is not innate to Muslim culture. Historical research on gender and Islamic societies suggests that authoritarian Islamic rulers and secular reformists often differentiated themselves from one another in terms of their policies toward women. Islamic rulers sought to consolidate their power in part by exerting control over women's lives, implementing *purdah* or restricting women's access to the public arena in part to wrest (or regain) power from secular leaders who had promoted women's education and participation in the labor force. Women's bodies became sites of struggle in religious-secular conflicts that were at core struggles for national control. In Afghanistan throughout the twentieth century, for example, "efforts by reformers and nationalists to improve the status of women . . . met with the fierce resistance of traditionalists and ulema (Islamic clergy) . . . [in the 1980s] the woman question was an integral part of the conflict between the tribal-Islamist mujahedeen and the ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan."²¹ The evidence Fish invokes does not reflect an inevitably patriarchal culture, but rather a culture whose patriarchal nature is the result of contingent historical struggles and political conflicts. His integration of the gender and mainstream literatures paves the way for new research.

The literature on democratization rests on a normative assumption that democracy is preferable to other regime types on all dimensions. This is not necessarily true for women. Democracy can worsen the prospects for gender equality. The demise of monarchy in the US, for example, limited the scope of political power available to women, as Eileen McDonagh explains:

At the founding of the American state, for example, the structural substitution of an electoral democracy for an inherited monarchy, while increasing the political citizenship of *some* men, decreased the political citizenship of *all* women. *Some* women lost the right to be queens, but by 1807, all states explicitly excluded women from the franchise, giving *no* women the right to vote.²²

As interesting as McDonagh's insight is, it is archaic and of limited value to contemporary democrats: after all, only one woman can be queen at a time.²³ But it is intriguing in that it casts a key finding about women's movements and democratization in a different light. Research on women and democratization consistently shows that moments of democratic founding have been accompanied by the demobilization and exclusion of women from political power. This finding has been demonstrated across time and in a wide range of contexts.²⁴ One of the central questions in the gender and democratization literature is this: "Why is it that some of the most active women's movements were unable to translate the importance of their pre-transition activism into greater gains in the immediate post-transition period?"²⁵ Democracy may be strongly preferable to the alternative, but that does not preclude acknowledgment of the problems that democracy consistently poses for women. Democracy's promises of freedom and equality are systematically denied to women not only in the private sphere, as we've long known, but also in the political arena. The irony here is that women's mobilization fosters democratic transition, as I showed earlier, but in all cases of democratization, regardless of whether they were pacted or the result of quick, insurgent change, transition to democracy brought about the demobilization of women's movements. The finding warrants inclusion as one of the "big and bounded" generalizations that Valerie Bunce draws from the vast literature on democratization.²⁶ Any phenomenon that disenfranchises 50 percent of the population seems sufficiently problematic to warrant consideration as one of the central questions of democratization.

Making Comparative Gender More Comparative

Gender scholars also bear responsibility for separation between the two fields. A core problem here lies in failing to problematize the degree to which gender is central to politics. One solution is to make comparative gender research more comparative. Work in this field often rests on an assumption that women are a unique group in relation to other groups in a particular context, but this assumption has not been subject to sufficient empirical scrutiny. Very little research compares women's movements to other kinds of movements, for example. The literature on women's movements has struggled to address differences *among* women, but few scholars have moved beyond gender in order to compare women to other groups. Most scholars in this field would affirm the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to gender, even if their own work falls short in terms of demonstrating the inextricability of multiple identities. What we understand less well is how the magnitude of differences among women compares to the size of differences between women and

other collective constituencies. Mainstream scholars might be more persuaded about the uniqueness of women if they could understand how women compare to other groups.

Mainstream scholars view the role of women's movements in the context of democratic transition as a single instance of a broader phenomenon and therefore an insufficient base from which to build valid theoretical claims about mobilization in general. Gender scholars maintain that women's movements constitute unique objects of study, valid in and of themselves, the distinctiveness and importance of which cannot be adequately explained by comparing them to non-gender phenomena. Scholars who work on labor and democratization face the same issue. In an article reviewing the role of labor unions in democratic transitions, Ruth Berins Collier and James Mahoney pose the same question that motivates this essay: "Why have scholars who study transitions from a comparative theoretical perspective failed to recognize the importance of workers and other collective actors?"²⁷ From a mainstream perspective, a focus on "the role of a fairly narrowly defined set of actors" poses problems for theory building.²⁸ This does not mean that gender research that focuses on a single case is neither theoretically informed nor theoretically relevant. While it may seem obvious to some that women have a unique position in the political system, others may need convincing. Are women unique, or are they more like labor unions or students—one group among others in the same political system, which faces the same set of opportunities and constraints that other groups face? Developing a theoretical argument about women's mobilization, therefore, may not necessarily require doing a gendered analysis. The role of women's movements might be explained in terms of factors that are not specific to gender. In order to integrate the two approaches, gender analysis must become more broadly comparative.

Let me draw an example from my own work to illustrate. In *Why Women Protest*, I sought to identify the conditions under which women mobilize as women and to specify what is distinctive about women's movements as compared to mobilization organized by other groups. Comparing two different cases of mobilization among women in one country, I argued that timing and framing prompt women to organize on the basis of their gender identity. In a later study, I extended this argument to compare women's movements in four countries, three cases in which women mobilized amid the democratic transition process and one in which women did not.²⁹ I can envision a third project, one I haven't (yet) undertaken, that would provide an even stronger test of the role of women's movements in democratization; this project would compare women's movements to other kinds of movements within the same democratization process. In the case of Chile, such a study would compare women's movements to poor

people's movements, labor unions, environmental groups, and indigenous groups. A more comparative approach would allow me to explain whether the dynamics evinced by women's movements are unique, or conform to similar patterns in other movements. Answering that question would bridge the two literatures.

Comparing women's movements to other kinds of movements is not the only way to integrate gender research and mainstream research. Gender research could be made more comparative by framing it in terms of mainstream research. How do elite-led vs. mass-led transitions affect the mobilization of women? How does the level of economic development, a factor strongly correlated with democratic stability, affect the mobilization and participation of women? How does the formation of elite pacts, which was key in Latin America but not in Eastern Europe, affect the role of women in the transition? Do different transition paths explain variations in women's mobilization, the efforts of women to gain elective office, or incorporation of women's demands onto the political agenda? How does the incorporation of women's demands vary with state capacity? Are regimes in which women's political participation is higher, more women are mobilized against a non-democratic regime, and where more women-friendly policies have been put in place more likely to become democratic, or become democratic more quickly?³⁰ Linking studies of gender to broader studies of dynamics of democratization will allow us to discern and explain patterns with greater precision.

Definitional issues plague comparative research on gender as well as the mainstream literature. Women's movements prove particularly hard to define, especially in ways that facilitate cross-national comparison.³¹ S. Laurel Weldon's cross-national study of violence against women provides an important exception. Weldon resolves the problem of definition by comparing women's movements in terms of their strength and level of autonomy. She combs through more than 100 case studies and qualitative accounts to develop quantitative measures of the strength and autonomy of women's movements in 36 countries. Her "on-off" coding method has limitations, but also "has the advantage of being clearly conceptually based on the discussion of women's movements in the literature and of also being relatively easy to apply to a variety of contexts."³² Weldon applies mainstream comparative methods to the study of women's movements by generating precise definitions of women's mobilization that facilitates cross-national comparison.

Conclusion

This essay examines how the concepts, variables, and questions common to democratization research have fostered a divide between mainstream and gender work. The narrow definitions of democracy predominant within

mainstream democratization research tend to obscure the participation of women, while a great deal of research on women and gender resists comparison that might challenge the primacy of gender.

How then should we proceed? If we view greater integration between these two fields as a desirable goal, how might we pursue it? Mainstream comparative scholars need to consider the significance of gender to the concepts they employ in their research. This would entail rejecting definitions of democracy that do not include the full participation of women as citizens or do not account for the ways in which women participate politically. Some may argue that doing so will sacrifice generalizability—but is it not oxymoronic to make generalizations about only half of the population? In elite-driven research, we might consider whether political elites employ gendered language to achieve their demands, manufacture consent, or establish legitimacy. We can explore processes of inclusion and exclusion in context of democratization as an explicit component of the transition process, rather than take political actors at face value.

I advocate integration and I believe that the best way to pursue it is through research itself. Within academia, research is the currency of power. Strong publications carry more clout than any other form of capital. Without research that interrogates the connections between gender and politics, we risk replicating the belief that gender is marginal to politics. For all the gains that have been made for women and gender within political science, serious problems remain. Undergraduate majors in political science will continue to see gender as peripheral, and will not ask the kinds of questions that propel our knowledge forward. Graduate students will continue to face pressure not to work on gender for fear it will risk their job prospects, and those who do study gender will be forced to do so outside their departments. Without proper training from gender scholars on the faculties of the top graduate programs, graduate students interested in women and gender end up teaching the field to themselves and reinventing the wheel, which stymies the advance of theoretically relevant work.

Integration of the kind I envision in this essay entails costs. It may take us out of our comfort zones. Gender scholars in comparative politics already know the mainstream literature, and indeed they have framed their research in terms of gaps, limitations, and exclusions within the mainstream literature. Promoting integration will require gender scholars to disseminate their work more broadly, to demonstrate more pointedly how to incorporate it into graduate and undergraduate curricula, and to devote more energy to showing how their work is central to politics and political science. Extending their research into non-gender-specific topics means accepting the possibility of finding that gender is not as central to politics as they initially thought or wanted to believe. Mainstream scholars will have to expand their knowledge about what the

scope of comparative politics really includes. Many people would simply prefer not to make the extra effort. Yet for those willing to bear the costs, the benefits to integration are great.

Notes

- 1 Tolleson-Rinehart and Carroll 2006, 512.
- 2 Beckwith 2000, 457.
- 3 Boix and Stokes 2007; Munck and Snyder 2007.
- 4 Lichbach and Zuckerman 2009. Karen Beckwith notes the striking absence of work on gender in the 1997 edition; Beckwith 2000, 457.
- 5 Waylen 2007, 15.
- 6 I identified the most frequently cited articles using the Social Science Citation Index, available at the ISI Web of Science (www.isiknowledge.com).
- 7 To identify these essays, I searched four journal databases (JSTOR, Academic Search Premier, Project Muse, and Worldwide Political Science Abstracts) using the search terms “democracy/ democratization” and “review.” This search yielded ten articles published between 1992 and 2004: Bunce 2000, 2003; Caraway 2004; Collier and Mahoney 1997; Geddes 1999; Joseph 1997; Kitschelt 1992; Munck 2001, 2004; Remmer 1995; Shin 1994.
- 8 Scott 1986, 1069.
- 9 Zalewski 2007, 2.
- 10 Squires and Weldes 2007.
- 11 Waylen 2007 reaches a similar conclusion in her more thorough and nuanced analysis of the democratization literature.
- 12 Munck 2001, 125.
- 13 Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992, 48, as quoted in Caraway 2004, 445.
- 14 Caraway 2004, 450.
- 15 Munck 2001, 125.
- 16 Bunce 2000, 2003.
- 17 Baldez 2002; Power 2003.
- 18 Fish 2002, 37.
- 19 Donno and Russett 2004.
- 20 Beckwith and Baldez 2005.
- 21 Moghadam 1997, 76.
- 22 McDonagh 2002, 535.
- 23 This sentence belongs to Christopher MacEvitt.
- 24 Alvarez 1990; Baldez 2002; Friedman 2000; Young 1999.
- 25 Waylen 2007, 1.
- 26 Bunce 2000.
- 27 Collier and Mahoney 1997, 300.
- 28 Munck 2001, 125.
- 29 Baldez 2003.
- 30 I thank Christopher MacEvitt for posing the question that prompted me to realize this.

- 31 Beckwith 2000, 457.
 32 Weldon 2002, 224.

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