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# FEMINIST POLITICAL SCIENCE AND FEMINIST POLITICS

**Marian Sawer**

**Abstract** This article moves away from issues of the impact of women and feminist scholarship on political science to examine the relationship of feminist political science to a political constituency. It traces the trajectory of feminist political science from its close relationship with women's movement activism in the 1970s to the highly professionalised disciplinary subfield of today. It highlights some of the dilemmas resulting both from professional imperatives and from the norms of research excellence stemming from new forms of research governance. It finds that feminist political science has been pushed towards addressing an international community of scholars in a language inaccessible to local publics. But it finds that despite such pressures, feminist political science has still sought to produce work that is of direct relevance to achieving women's movement goals, whether within public policy or within political institutions broadly conceived. While it may no longer be speaking the same language, it is still seeking to identify the obstacles to change and the possibilities for transformation. This can be seen particularly clearly in the area of research on the intersection of electoral systems, quotas and party structures. Yet even here tensions can emerge, as with the concept of 'critical mass', perceived by activists as a crucial discursive tool but problematised by feminist scholars.

Carol Johnson provides a considered and nuanced account of how far women have come in Australian political science, the continuing issues in terms of professional recognition and the limited impact of feminist critique on the discipline. Rather than go over some of the same ground that Johnson has traversed so well, I shall begin at the point at which she concludes her paper in this issue: the obligation of political science to address the 'pressing injustices of our democracy'. I shall trace the trajectory of feminist political science from its close relationship with women's movement activism in the 1970s to the highly professionalised disciplinary subfield of today. In doing so I shall highlight some of the dilemmas resulting from the need to adapt to new professional norms within the discipline while attempting to maintain relevance to women's movements outside. While the starting point is Australian, I also draw on international and comparative evidence as does feminist scholarship itself.

## Theory and Practice in the 1970s

In the 1970s, feminist scholarship in political science was often activist both in nature and intent. It flowed directly from women's movement reframing of issues, particularly the reframing of the personal as political and the problematising of the

division between the public and the private on which much political science rested. For example, the women's movement was naming experiences such as sexual harassment and domestic violence as political issues that reflected and reinforced gender inequality. Feminist scholarship sought to validate itself in relation to the women's movement, helping to illuminate women's movement practice at the same time as learning from it. Work produced by feminist political scientists in this period—for example, Jo Freeman's 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' (1972), duplicated versions of which appeared in Australia—had lasting influence both on social movement practice and social movement theory.

The close relationship between theory and practice was evident in 1973 when the first scholarship inspired by the 'second wave' appeared in Australian political science. In the academic study of the 1972 federal election, women who combined activist and social science credentials documented the successful agenda-setting of Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) before and during that election (Mayer 1973). They analysed the repertoire employed by WEL, its media strategies, its national candidate survey and its membership and model of operation, both in the city and countryside. The six articles on WEL and one on Women Active Politically were blueprints for how women could get their concerns onto the political agenda (for example, Glezer, Mercer, and Strong, 1973). For a start, this meant redefining these concerns as political, which shocked some politicians not used to having to answer questions about contraception and sex education or even childcare. Political scientists had shared these assumptions about what constituted the proper subject matter of politics, which excluded those issues that women activists were now naming as of first-order importance in their lives.

In the same year, 1973, the second wave arrived in the pages of *Politics*, the journal of the Australasian Political Studies Association. An article by political scientist Thelma Hunter (1973) critical of 'revolutionary feminism' was accompanied by three responses by Eileen Haley, Anne Summers and Marian Sawer. These suggested that Hunter's critique was misdirected in arguing that women's liberation should adopt a more pluralist conception of power and traditional pressure group methods. All three respondents combined some form of academic and activist activity. This was strikingly true of Summers who, the following year was to found Elsie, Australia's first women's refuge, while also doing a Ph.D. in the Government Department at the University of Sydney. Her supervisor was Henry Mayer, the editor of both the election book and of *Politics*. According to his wife, being exposed to these new ideas convinced Mayer that he should wash the dishes, which he did from then on (Wilson 2006).

Not all political scientists were as receptive to feminist ideas as was Mayer. Inspired by women's movement critique of received wisdom, feminist scholars disputed claims of the political science discipline to be value-free, finding instead that many of its findings were based on 'sexist scientism' (Goot and Reid 1975). Feminist scholarship was often problem-oriented, seeing its role as helping to identify the sources of women's subordination in order to liberate women or at least to achieve equal citizenship. In keeping with its problem orientation, it was often multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary. Typical of such approaches was the work of scholars of equal pay, who contributed evidence to show that unequal pay had political causes: it resulted from the configuration of feminised industries and lack of industrial muscle to make successful claims for work value, rather than from women's choices or lack of human capital (for example, Phillips and Taylor 1980).

A good example of how feminist scholars in the 1970s were more influenced by women's movement norms than norms internal to the discipline can be seen in a collection published in Melbourne called *The Other Half: Women in Australian Society* edited by Jan Mercer (1975). The contributors included a number of future university professors and one future vice-chancellor. But far from presenting their academic credentials, these scholars did not even attach their names to their contributions. The book explained:

The names of contributors are not listed on the contents page or linked with the contributions in the body of the book, as it is the ideas themselves rather than who presented them that is crucial. Nor is it relevant to indicate the academic status of individual writers because these have been allocated in terms of a male dominated and defined system of rewards. (Mercer 1975, 5)

While this decision not to name authors was in keeping with women's movement emphasis on the collective rather than the individual, there were other examples from this time of lack of attribution of authors. Australia's *Current Affairs Bulletin* did not name its authors until the 1970s, perhaps to not only enable university academics to publish substantial articles on current affairs without fear or favour, but also to illustrate the lack of pressure to demonstrate quantifiable research outputs.

### The Impact of Changing Disciplinary Norms

The increasing professional pressures within the discipline meant that, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, feminist political science was no longer directly speaking in terms generated by an outside political movement. Its language now matched the increased professionalisation of the discipline, and its message was often directed to an international community of scholars rather than to local publics. This can be seen particularly in the increased emphasis on comparative work focused on explanatory variables, rather than the closely observed studies of the gendered nature of political processes that characterised early studies. On the other hand, women still avoided the most abstract end of the discipline; they constituted only 5 per cent of authors of articles adopting a 'game-theoretic' approach to the discipline over the past 20 years (West and Jacquet 2012).

Yet, to be accepted within the discipline, feminist political scientists had to become expert in the methodologies that now defined it. To take one example, there was little evidence of methodological sophistication in pioneering work on feminist interventions within the state (Sawer 1990). Such work did, however, draw attention to feminist institution building within the state and the kind of opportunity structure and discursive strategies that enabled it to occur and be effective. It also drew attention to the opportunities presented by multilevel governance and to the different dynamics of different policy sectors (the original rationale for gender budgeting, given the resistance of economic portfolios to feminist interventions). Out of such early work came more advanced comparative work such as that of Louise Chappell (2002). Others, including Jennifer Curtin and Kathy Teghtsoonian (2010), provided fine-grained institutional analysis to explain why some women's policy agencies were able to survive relatively unscathed through political and discursive shifts. The Feminism and Institutionalism International

Network (FIIN), based in Edinburgh, fostered such exploration using new institutionalist frameworks to explain why, even when feminists helped design new political institutions, overarching institutional frameworks could reassert their own logic of appropriateness (Mackay 2009). Feminist scholars also explored the opportunities and constraints for feminist activism posed by multilevel governance, whether in the form of federalism or broader trends towards devolution and regionalism.

Even more ambitious was the large-scale comparative project under the auspices of Dorothy E. McBride and Amy G. Mazur and their Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS) project. In the capstone book of the RNGS project, McBride and Mazur (2010, 241) set out their goal of making 'social science research more scientific'. Their claims include the use of methods of statistical inference, 'specifically regression tests of three ordinal models', and the use of 'crisp-set qualitative comparative analysis' to explain the factors most responsible for the effectiveness of women's policy agencies. While such claims might be necessary for credibility within the political science discipline, often-strong narratives were more meaningful for activists looking for models of successful policy intervention.

The changing nature of research governance and research evaluation has pushed feminist scholarship towards establishing its credentials not only in relation to internal disciplinary norms but also in relation to externally imposed norms of research excellence that privilege publication in high-impact international journals. Emma Foster and her colleagues have suggested recently that such frameworks have a detrimental effect on whether political scientists feel able to place their unit of analysis close to 'home'. The emphasis on the kind of international topics of interest to international journals may encourage 'a movement in focus far removed from the everyday relationships, localised political processes and personal subjectivities that are key to analysing the full impact of gender relations' (Foster et al. 2013, 582). It has also been shown that research quality frameworks tend to privilege the 'core' of disciplines over work on the boundaries, drawing on other disciplines. As already noted, much feminist scholarship has been of this multidisciplinary character (Spongberg 2010, 108).

### **Feminist Activism and Scholarship into the twenty-first Century**

Despite the pressures imposed by new forms of research governance, feminist political scientists are still seeking to produce work that is of direct relevance to the achievement of women's movement goals. Indeed, a forthcoming collection honouring the work of UK political scientist Joni Lovenduski, *Deeds and Words* (Campbell and Childs forthcoming), sets out to record exactly this: the interaction between gender and politics research and the practice of politics. It focuses on the practical applications of feminist scholarship in areas such as public policy and electoral system design.

As emphasised in *Deeds and Words*, since 1975, feminist political scientists have played an important role in the dissemination of 'best practice' models of policy machinery to promote the advancement of women, including through the United Nations (UN) Expert Group Meetings (for example, Rai 2003). Their analysis of the need to apply a gender lens to public policy across all policy sectors contributed to the global diffusion of gender budgeting through international organisations such as the UN and the Commonwealth of Nations (for example, Budlender and Hewitt 2002). The increased emphasis after 1995 on the mainstreaming of gender analysis into policy processes, whether promoted

by the UN, the European Union or individual countries like Canada, gave a new practical application to gender scholarship.

Gender mainstreaming, however, was sometimes criticised for its technocratic implications. It was seen as relying too much on gender experts and bureaucratic tool kits and as privileging disaggregated data and quantitative methods over the experiential knowledge of women in the community. Canadian critics argued that the participation of women's organisations in the policy process had been undermined by 'the re-framing of gender analysis as a scientific objective process that can be conducted without the participation of advocacy groups' (Rankin and Wilcox 2004, 57). They also saw the increased role of the gender expert as an example of the neoliberal substitution of the individual for the collective. In Europe, however, feminist scholars argued that the introduction of gender expertise into policy development did not have to be, and should not be, at the expense of democratic process and the involvement of diverse women's civil society organisations (Walby 2005; Verloo 2011). In Australia, Carol Bacchi and Joan Eveline concurred that 'the challenge of developing gender-equitable policy was not a matter of experts versus community' but rather of ensuring that women's policy units had the resources to facilitate effective consultation (Bacchi and Eveline 2010, 211).

The new emphasis on diversity within gender mainstreaming policy and on 'intersectionality' within feminist scholarship could itself give rise to tensions. The influential concept of intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) in an attempt to specify how both gender and race relations shaped the lives of Black women in the USA. In public policy terms, it came to indicate a focus on how patterns of inclusion and exclusion are affected by more than one attribute (such as gender, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, etc.) and how these interact. The problems emerged when a focus on intersectionality was perceived to fragment gender equality strategies rather than enabling alliance-building across organised difference (Weldon 2011).

### **Political Representation: Collaboration and Collisions**

Electoral system research is one area where feminist activism and scholarship shaped by disciplinary norms appear to have combined relatively well. The pioneer in this area was Wilma Rule who, from the 1980s, was publishing analysis showing which type of electoral system was most favourable to election of women. Rule was not only publishing influential scholarly analyses (for example, Rule 1987) but was also actively promoting electoral reform through Californians for Electoral Reform. Others who subsequently took up the cause of electoral system research and electoral system reform have included Pippa Norris and Manon Tremblay, the latter winning the Wilma Rule Award of the International Political Science Association in 2006. Meanwhile, Norris promoted women-friendly electoral reform through her work for the UN and other international organisations as well as producing magisterial volumes of quantitative political science (Norris 2004). Alice Brown (forthcoming) in Scotland drew on her comparative knowledge of electoral system design to successfully advocate for the 'twinning' system introduced by the Scottish Labour Party, whereby constituencies were twinned and the woman with the highest number of preselection votes became the candidate for one constituency while the man with the highest number of votes became the candidate for the other.

Gender electoral quotas are a related area where feminist scholarship has contributed to policy diffusion through international organisations and women's movement

mobilisations. Of particular practical importance has been research on the intersection of quotas, electoral systems and party structures. Danish political scientist Drude Dahlerup contributed much of the early work on quota strategies to increase women's political representation and oversaw the development of the quota database of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) in Stockholm.<sup>1</sup> Mona Lena Krook extended comparative research on gender electoral quotas (Krook 2009) while also creating a Facebook group through which there were regular exchanges of information on gender quotas being adopted across the world both at national and subnational levels and in transnational institutions.

Feminist political scientists such as Julie Ballington and Sonia Palmieri were also contributing to the exchange of best practice and policy monitoring through their work for IDEA and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). The IDEA handbook, *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers* (Ballington and Karam 2005), was first published in 1998 and was translated into Spanish, French and Indonesian and an overview prepared in Russian. The IPU's global ranking of national parliaments on the representation of women became a vital tool in women's movement campaigns for quotas and other measures to increase women's participation in public decision-making. Feminist political scientists participated in IPU and UN forums on strategies to promote women's participation in parliamentary decision-making, alongside women politicians from older and newer democracies (Palmieri 2011). Feminist scholars were contributing the same kind of applied work monitoring and assessing women's parliamentary representation at the national and subnational levels; for example, the gender research of the Australian Parliamentary Library and of the Research Service of the Library of the New South Wales Parliamentary Library (see McCann and Wilson 2012; Drabsch 2011).

The work of feminist political scientists on women's parliamentary representation might seem a relatively straightforward case of political science at the service of the women's movement. It can also illustrate, however, an uneasy relationship between feminist scholarship and women's movement activism. In the 1990s, the underrepresentation of women in national parliaments became a major issue for women's movements around the world. Although the number of democracies had tripled with the fall of communist and authoritarian regimes, the parliamentary representation of women worldwide was going backwards. This became labelled as a democratic deficit and was taken up by international organisations as well as by women's movements on the ground.

One way in which women's movements became mobilised around the issue was through the suggestion that women in parliament would make a difference for other women, through acting on the issues of importance to them. The 1990s, however, were not a decade that was particularly favourable to feminist advocacy within parliament. Internationally, forms of governance were increasingly influenced by neoliberal philosophy and by the privileging of markets over public sector provision and the welfare state. While more women began entering parliaments, they often seemed to lack voice to protest against budget cuts with disproportionate impact on women (for example, cuts in assistance for sole parents). In this context, an appealing concept emerged, appealing because it could be deployed to support continuing demands for more women in parliament, while also pre-empting possible disillusionment with the inability of those already elected to make a difference. This concept leapt from the pages of feminist political science onto the agendas of international organisations and the manifestos of campaigning organisations. It was the concept of 'critical mass', and it took on a life of its

own, far removed from Drude Dahlerup's initial analysis in *Scandinavian Political Studies* (1988, 2006).

Dahlerup had set out to investigate whether the concept of critical mass, taken from nuclear physics by Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) to analyse the experience of minorities within corporations, might be relevant to gender dynamics within parliaments. The idea was that relative proportions had a discernible effect on group behaviour. While a group remained at token levels, there were enormous pressures to overcome the distrust associated with visible 'difference' by demonstrating loyalty to the values and norms of the dominant group. Kanter argued that these dynamics changed once the minority achieved a certain size, sometimes stated to be around 30 per cent. By extension of Kanter's argument, if women became at least 30 per cent of membership of elected bodies they would at last be able to make a real difference to the culture and agenda of politics and engage in the 'substantive' representation of women.

This was an idea that took wing across the world. It was seized upon by women activists seeking party or legislative quotas (a Spanish translation was influential in Latin America) and was also adopted by the UN agencies. It was reflected in the General Recommendation on Article 7 of the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), issued by the CEDAW Committee in 1997. It read:

Research demonstrates that if women's participation reaches 30 to 35 percent (generally termed a 'critical mass', there is a real impact on the political style and content of decisions, and political life is revitalized. (CEDAW 1997, para. 16)

Research, however, did not provide this convenient linkage of numbers with a qualitative change in political norms and practices. Dahlerup herself had been cautious about the analogy between a physical and a social process and suggested that the willingness and ability of members of minority groups to engage in critical acts was generally more important than critical mass. Yet scholars often misread her original argument and took up many pages of scholarly journals demonstrating that numbers in themselves were not sufficient to make a difference and that there were many intervening factors that facilitated or constrained the substantive representation of women (Childs and Krook 2006).

There was now a clash between feminist political science and the perceived needs of the women's movement. At a conference in the parliament buildings in Ottawa, I witnessed the extraordinary disappointment of members of Equal Voice, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) seeking to increase the representation of women in parliament, at the paper given by a feminist political scientist (Trimble 2006). They saw the scholarly evidence she presented, casting doubt on the critical mass hypothesis, as undermining their efforts to achieve change. The idea that critical mass would enable women to make a difference was for them a vital discursive tool in mobilising women and building an advocacy coalition.

### **New Agendas**

Of course, this collision between feminist political science and feminist political activism is not the end of the story. At both national and international levels, feminist scholars and activists have pushed the agenda beyond numbers, to research what kind of

institutional supports can help legislators focus more effectively on gender equality issue, whether parliamentary committees, parliamentary commissions, women's caucuses or parliamentary friendship groups with a specific gender equality mandate. In 2013, at the Third European Conference on Politics and Gender in Barcelona, a new international research network was created to link feminist political scientists with each other and with the gender equality projects of the IPU. The new organisation was called the Gender-Focused Parliamentary Institutions Research Network (GenParlNet) and its aim was to coordinate research on the relatively new gender-focused bodies appearing in different parliaments around the world (<http://cass.anu.edu.au/research-projects>). The intention was not only simply to identify the characteristics of these bodies or how they came into being but also to assess their contribution to women's movement goals. This is similar to the work of feminist political scientists in assessing other forms of feminist institution building, whether inside or outside the state and whether inside or outside mainstream institutions (Maddison and Sawyer 2013).

Gender-focused parliamentary committees, parliamentary groups or caucuses may serve as a channel for women's groups into the legislative process and the bringing of gender equality perspectives into parliamentary deliberation; they may also include more technical roles in oversight of gender mainstreaming or the application of a gender lens to policy. The scholarly hypothesis is that in an environment where raising feminist perspectives may be career-damaging for individual women legislators, such bodies can take the pressure off by creating an institutional mandate or platform for the substantive representation of women. In addition, such bodies may provide a forum in which male champions of gender equality can play an important role.

Feminist political science has changed greatly over the past 40 years, becoming more specialised, professionalised and internationalised. It reflects not only the changes that have taken place in political science, but also to some extent in the women's movement itself as movement organisations have also become specialised, professionalised and internationalised. These changes in the repertoire of women's movements may be a response to increased demands by government for policy expertise as well as the growth in globalised forms of governance, transnational advocacy networks and the new communication technologies that make them possible. These same factors, together with pressure from research quality frameworks, have encouraged feminist political science to develop international scholarly networks and to focus more on international comparative work. These changes and shifts in focus experienced by both feminist scholarship and feminist politics have not resulted in any irreparable rift between the two. Despite occasional accusations of retreat into self-referential scholarship wrapped up in impenetrable jargon, on the whole, feminist political science has remained exemplary in its interaction with feminist political practice and its continuing desire to be 'useful' to women's movements.

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## NOTE

1. Dahlerup (1988–1990) also wrote *We Have Waited Long Enough. Handbook on Women's Representation*, published by the Nordic Council in Danish, Icelandic, Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish.

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