

Advancing Women in Political Science: Navigating Gendered Structures of Opportunity

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Although women enroll in graduate programs at similar rates to men, women are increasingly under-represented in ascending the ranks of assistant, associate, and full professors (Monroe and Chiu 2010; cf. APSA Task Force 2011). Gender equality at the highest tiers of political science would broaden the scope and strengthen the quality of our research as a collective, and would signal to male and female students that ours is an inclusive discipline. Further, this gender gap becomes all the more pressing in an era of rapid change in academia. The “leaking pipeline” of women from political science suggests that our discipline must address the presence of women in tenure-track, tenured, and full professor positions (APSA Task Force 2004).

Under what conditions can women achieve the strongest gains at the highest ranks of political science? Lessons may be drawn from the wealth of research on gender equality in political parties and parliaments. Mirroring the hierarchy in political science, party politics finds fewer and fewer women the more powerful the position becomes (Bashevkin 1993; Kittilson 2006; Putnam 1976). First, I highlight findings from studies of women in parties and parliaments, and then I offer some “best practices” for promoting gender equality in political science. In turn, these ideal practices suggest some next steps in the process of mobilizing for change.

A GENDERED OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE

Similar to parties and parliaments, women in political science navigate a gendered opportunity structure. The opportunity structure is made up of a set of institutions—including formal rules, shared norms, and common practices. Institutions are infrequently gender-neutral (Kenney 1996; Lovenduski 1998). Like Karen Beckwith in this issue (2015), I emphasize that we must take seriously the gendered nature of institutions and identify conducive structures. Existing disciplinary rules, norms, and practices were initially constructed in an era when gender roles were more traditional and rigid. Both women’s activities and the existing structures are key to advancing women in party politics and in political science.

The current structure of political science presents multiple points of access in pressing for change. Table 1 displays three sets of research findings: 1) lobbying efforts; 2) organization; and 3) rule changes. The second column of Table 1 presents select findings from research on women in party politics for

each of these strategies. Finally, the third column applies research findings from gender and party politics to political science as an academic discipline. The remainder of this paper addresses each of the three sets of research findings.

Dual Lobbying Strategy: Bottom-Up and Top Down

Research on women in party politics shows that pressure for women’s inclusion is most effective when it comes simultaneously from grassroots activists and from the top party leadership (Kittilson 2006). As more women with higher education and the traditionally requisite skills and resources come forward, women’s under-representation in office stands out sharply. Women dissatisfied with their inability to gain power in electoral politics press for change. When these bottom-up pressures are coupled with the efforts of a few women who have already achieved power, the effects are stronger. Women in top-level positions such as party National Executive Committees can “let down the ladder” by nominating other women for high-level positions, or by pressing for systematic party rule changes such as gender quotas (Kittilson 2006; Kunovich and Paxton 2005; Tremblay and Pelletier 2001).

Similarly, dual pressures from the bottom-up and top-down may improve women’s access to the top echelons of political science. By recruiting, training, and encouraging more women in political science graduate programs we strengthen the base of women in our discipline. As the number of women has grown among graduate students in recent decades, the under-representation among women as full professors, endowed chairs, and APSA presidents has been sharpened in our focus.

At the same time, critical actors at the senior ranks and among disciplinary leadership bodies are key agents for change. Critical actors can be men or women—they are actors who have the willingness and power to “bring about women-friendly policy change” (Childs and Krook 2009, 127). These critical actors may already be among the top levels of the discipline, and can expand and institutionalize gains by pressing for changes in rules and existing practices. By codifying gender egalitarian procedures, women’s gains become widespread and routine.

Dual Organizational Strategy: Women’s Organizations and Established Channels

Existing research on women in political parties is split over whether women should organize within separate women’s organizations within parties, or press for change in the existing

mainstream party channels. On the one hand, women's organizations facilitate women's gains by fostering repeated interactions, supportive networks, and a sense of group consciousness among women. Further, women's organizations provide a launching pad to collectively articulate women's demands for greater representation and to influence party leaders to address gender inequality (Kittilson 2006; Leyenaar

Similarly, women within political science departments may organize as women and also seek representation on departmental hiring and administrative committees and as faculty chairs. At the university level, women may simultaneously participate on Faculty Women's Associations and in general Faculty Senate and university committees. In these sites powerful male allies can be critical actors supporting and advancing women.

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2004; Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Wiliarty 2010). Walsh's (2011) research shows that women's organizations benefit from links with other organizations. On the other hand, separate organizations may isolate women from the power centers within parties (Appleton and Mazur 1993).

The benefits of each approach suggest that it is prudent to pursue both simultaneously. Women's organizations remain important bodies within parties. At the same time, women continue to work with their male counterparts in the mainstream party channels. By having women well placed at all levels and in all arenas of the party, when there is a window of opportunity, these women can act upon it to mobilize for change.

By extension, women can and do mobilize for change in women's organizations in political science as a discipline, and in women's faculty associations on campuses across the country. They should continue to do so. For example, the Women's Caucus for Political Science mobilizes to promote women at all levels of the professoriate, and constructs and publicizes regular reports on women's progress. The Committee of the Status of Women in the Profession (CSWP) tracks women's progress at different ranks within the profession and offers nominations for the APSA Board and Presidency. Thus, the CSWP promotes both tracks—women organized as women, and women among the established power centers.

Dual Rule Change Strategy: Existing Rules and New Rules

A singular focus on women's resources and skills or on women's organizational strategies would implicitly place the burden for change on women themselves. Therefore, we must also ask how our disciplinary institutions, practices, and norms can be altered to encourage women's advancement to the top echelons of political science. How does the opportunity structure influence the probability of women's inclusion among the top ranks and women's (and their allies') strategies to increase that probability? Research on party politics suggests some types of existing rules that may benefit women: power-sharing electoral rules and clear and transparent rules. In addition, the adoption of new rules such as gender quotas and targets will bolster women's numbers.

Broadly, power-sharing rules in electoral systems promote gender equality (Norris 2008). Power-sharing rules aim to represent a wide array of socio-political groups among decision-makers, and are characterized by proportional representation, low electoral thresholds, and large district magnitudes. One of the strongest findings in women and politics research is that proportional representation systems boost women's numbers in elected office (e.g., Beckwith 1992; Norris 1997; Reynolds 1999; Rule 1987). The proportional translation of votes into

Table 1

Strategies for Promoting Gender Egalitarian Practices and Policies

	Research Findings	Best Practices
Lobbying: Bottom-Up and Top-Down	Women's increasing education and resources expand eligible pool	Encourage women in graduate programs, and provide hands-on training in research skills
	Critical actors at top echelons push for institutional changes	Women already in top-level positions push for rule change
Organizational Strategy: Women's Organizations and Established Channels	Women work within separate women's organizations to advance women	Mobilize within women's organizations in political science and faculty women's associations to advance women
	Critical actors work in existing mainstream organizations to press for change	Participate in organizations and faculty committees to advance women
Rule Changes: Existing Rules and New Rules	Formalized, clear rules encourage women's advancement	Provide clear rules for advancement and disseminate them broadly
	Power sharing rules and a logic of inclusion represent a wide array of groups, including women	Adopt power sharing and broad inclusion of groups within political science
	Gender quotas and targets heighten women's advancement	Adopt gender quotas or targets for gender balance in short lists, administration, and committees

seats gives incentives to parties to run more women for office. The mechanism underpinning this relationship appears to be a “logic of inclusion” under which the parties find an electoral payoff in balancing the ticket—in terms of representing not only women, but also different age groups and ideological factions of the party.

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Formalized and clear rules encourage women’s advancement through the party ranks (Kittilson 2006). When party rules are formalized and transparent, newcomers like women find it easier to figure out the rules in the first place, and then can successfully adjust their strategies. By contrast, informal practices more often benefit established powerholders, who are usually men. For example, in Thai party politics a strong reliance on informal practices, under which male political aspirants frequently network with other male elected officials, virtually assures the nomination of a male candidate in the next election (Bjarnegard 2010).

New rules can also benefit women in politics. Gender quotas and targets provide a “fast track” to women’s election to office (Dahlerup 2006; Tripp and Kang 2008). Quota policies explicitly acknowledge that gender inequality is a persistent structural problem in need of a systematic and direct fix. In some instances, strict quotas are not feasible. Instead, soft quotas or targets may be enacted to set goals for gender equality on a committee, or rotation among men and women among top officers.

Inclusive power-sharing rules may also be found in political science departments and professional organizations. Rules may benefit women if they encourage wide representation of different groups on departmental leadership committees. Further, women stand to gain from the provision of “clearer information, earlier, about professional careers and the ‘rules of the game’ to women in undergraduate and graduate programs and first faculty appointments” (APSA Task Force 2004, iv). Specifically, transparent and formal guidelines for tenure and promotion may improve women’s gains. Clear formal rules afford each tenure and promotion candidate with equal amounts of information, resulting in a more even-handed process. By contrast, hazy rules and procedures favor those “in the know,” who are often given information in informal networks of existing powerholders. Finally, gender equality targets would benefit departments and professional committees by setting goals to improve diversity. Hiring and personnel committees within political science departments might set targets for gender balance among members.

NEXT STEPS

By considering these best practices from the research on gender in party politics, several steps for future mobilization emerge. First, political science needs more women as departmental chairs, administrators, APSA board members, and APSA presidents. This move improves the likelihood

of top-down change. Both women and men can be “critical actors” who press for women-friendly policy changes. Second, we must strengthen the resources of women’s organizations in political science. The article by Carol Mershon and Denise Walsh in this issue also wisely suggests that women form organizations within their departments. Further, as Valeria

Sinclair-Chapman (this issue) indicates here, these women’s organizations and professional caucuses must develop connections with one another to share strategies and effective practices. Taken together, women’s organizations represent a bottom-up push for gender equality. Finally, the rules matter for gender equality. The most promising opportunity structures incentivize power sharing among decision-makers, present clear rules in hiring, tenure, and promotion, and set target numbers for gender equality.

Further, in searching for the practices and policies that most efficiently and successfully promote women, we may look to political science departments around the world. Where are women best represented at the highest echelons? Which practices and policies are utilized in these departments? By systematically examining a wide range of professional models we may gain some fresh insights into this process. Effective new policies in one department may be held up as an example by women in another department to press for change. ■

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