

Gendering Party Politics: Feminist Institutional Perspectives

Meryl Kenny, Elin Bjarnegård (eds.)

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Political parties play a central role in shaping women's political representation¹. As the primary gatekeepers of political recruitment, they determine who gains access to candidacies, leadership positions, and ultimately political power. Thus, understanding how parties structure gendered patterns of inclusion and exclusion has become a central concern of feminist institutionalist scholarship over the past three decades. *Gendering Party Politics: Feminist Institutional Perspectives*, edited by Meryl Kenny and Elin Bjarnegård, represents the most comprehensive effort to date to consolidate this growing body of research. Bringing together seventeen chapters, the volume synthesizes decades of scholarship on gender and party politics while demonstrating how feminist institutionalism (FI) provides an important framework for analysing, and ultimately transforming, political parties.

The volume is organised into three complementary sections that move from conceptual debates to empirical analyses and, finally, to questions of institutional change. The opening section revisits the key concepts underpinning FI approaches to party politics, building on the foundational work of Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski (1993). The second section highlights methodological and empirical diversity that characterizes the field through studies of candidate selection, party leadership, women's political parties, and resistance to gender equality across a wide range of contexts. Two findings stand out: using large-N methods, Grahn (Chapter 11) shows that Swedish candidate quotas have weakened

and broadened the "ideal politician" model, benefiting native-born women most, while Gatto and Wylie (Chapter 9) find that Brazilian party elites deploy informal institutions to hinder formal reforms aimed at inclusion, yet this also fosters grassroots innovations of resistance, such as coletivos. The final section shifts the focus from understanding gendered party organisations to identifying strategies for institutional transformation.

The principal contribution thus lies in consolidating a field that has expanded considerably since the 1990s across diverse substantive, methodological, and geographical strands. Research on gendered party organisations has developed through studies of candidate recruitment, informal institutions, party leadership, political ambition, violence against women in politics, feminist institutional change, among others. By bringing together many of the scholars who have individually shaped these debates, Kenny and Bjarnegård demonstrate the cumulative potential of FI as a coherent research programme. The breadth of empirical cases is particularly noteworthy. Rather than reproducing a predominantly Western account of party politics, the inclusion of cases from the Global South illustrates how gendered institutions operate across political contexts and broadens the comparative horizons of the literature.

Perhaps the volume's most distinctive contribution, however, is its engagement with the broader implications of FI research for institutional change. The final section explores how insights generated through decades of research can inform efforts to make political parties more gender-equitable organisations. The contributions by Tania Verge, Sarah Childs, and Carmen Geha are particularly noteworthy. Verge (Chapter 14), drawing on

¹ Claude Sonnet 5 was used for language editing; all analysis, arguments, and conclusions are the author's own.

her experience as scholar and former equality minister of the Catalan government, shows that feminist party reform requires a strong intra-party feminist structure and key alliances with leadership to prevent exclusionary resistance. By demonstrating how FI can inform debates on party reform and organisational change, this section broadens the volume's appeal, making it a valuable resource for both scholars and practitioners.

The breadth that constitutes one of the collection's greatest strengths nevertheless also reveals its principal limitation. Although the editors successfully organise the volume around three main sections, the individual contributions engage only intermittently with one another's theoretical and methodological implications. This is particularly evident in Part II, which occasionally reads more as an outstanding aggregation of scholarship than as a fully integrated collective conversation. Its introduction provides limited overarching discussion of methodologies, data sources, and strategies for investigating parties, leaving the insights developed across the chapters somewhat disconnected. More sustained dialogue among the contributions—particularly on methodological challenges, shared conceptual tensions, and future research priorities—would have strengthened this section. Given the growing methodological sophistication of research on party organisation and gender, the volume would also have benefited from a more cohesive treatment of comparative research design, and data strengths and limitations. These issues are addressed across several chapters, but remain dispersed rather than brought together into a shared conversation of

the challenges and opportunities facing the field. Such a synthesis would have enhanced the volume's value both for scholars entering the field and for those seeking to advance its methodological development.

These observations, however, do little to diminish the significance of the volume. *Gendering Party Politics* reflects the maturation of a field that has moved beyond documenting women's exclusion to examining the institutional processes through which political parties produce, reproduce, and can ultimately transform gendered inequalities. By combining conceptual innovation, methodological pluralism, comparative empirical research, and practical reflections on institutional reform, the volume succeeds not only in taking stock of FI scholarship but also in setting an ambitious agenda for its future development. Important next steps for the field include more systematic comparative research designs, methodological reflection on studying "invisible" phenomena such as informal institutions, and genuinely intersectional research designs. This volume is an indispensable reading for scholars of political parties, political representation, and democratic governance, and equally valuable for practitioners committed to advancing gender equality within political organisations.

References

Lovenduski, Joni/Pippa Norris (1993), *Gender and Party Politics*, SAGE Publications.