

Feminism and Rational Choice Theory

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Abstract

Feminism and rational choice theory have both been hailed as approaches with the potential to revolutionize political science. Apart from a few exceptions, however, work that utilizes these two perspectives rarely overlaps. This paper reviews the main contributions of feminism and rational choice theory to the study of politics and then initiates a dialogue across them in order to explore the potential for a combined approach. It argues that a synthesis of feminism and rational choice theory would involve attending to questions of gender, strategy, institutions, power, and change. The contours and benefits of this approach are then illustrated with reference to four areas of research: gender quotas and women's legislative behavior, core topics in feminist analysis, and bargaining and 'tipping' models, central to the literature on rational choice. These examples are intended to illustrate how studies in each vein would ask new questions, generate new models, and offer findings that present new recommendations for altering the status quo. Further research will be necessary to elaborate what such feminist-rational choice analysis would actually look like in practice. The aim of the present discussion is simply to point to promising directions for future study, given current gaps and silences in political research. While a feminist-rational choice framework may not be suitable for investigating all topics, it presents some possible solutions to enduring puzzles in political science.

Feminism and Rational Choice Theory

Research in political science is characterized by a variety of different approaches. In recent years, proponents of two schools in particular have claimed major innovations in political analysis. One identifies feminism as one of the most “significant intellectual movements of the late twentieth century” (Ritter and Mellow 2000, 122). The other describes rational choice theory as the “paradigm in social science that offers the promise of bringing a greater theoretical unity among disciplines than has existed until now” (Coleman 1989, 5). Despite a shared ambition to rethink the study of politics, however, research employing these two perspectives rarely intersects. One review of the literature on gender quotas finds that while feminist scholars appear to be open to a wide range of methods and approaches, few undertake rational choice analyses (Krook and Squires 2006). Analogous overviews of work using rational choice theory note that research on gender and identity is often seen as least amenable to rational choice analysis (Calvert 2002; Hechter and Kanazawa 1997). These intuitions are confirmed through a quick survey of articles published in top journals: between 2002 and 2007, the *American Political Science Review* and the *American Journal of Political Science* published 600 pieces, 24 on feminist topics and 298 using a rational choice approach, with an overlap of only five articles.

The divide between feminism and rational choice theory has been noted and discussed in a range of related disciplines, including economics (Ferber and Nelson 1993; Peter 2003; Seiz 1995; Sen 1990), philosophy (Anderson 2001; Atherton 1993; Cudd 2001; Thalos 2005), and sociology (England 1989; Friedman and Diem 1993; Luker 1975). However, few political scientists reflect on this separation or explore the potential for mutual engagement (for partial exceptions, see Campbell 2006; Harvey 1998; Murray 2007). This paper aims to begin this conversation by considering what each brings to the analysis of politics and what might be gained by forging a combined approach. The first section begins by outlining the diverse ways in which feminists and rational choice theorists

seek to rethink the form and content of political research. Turning to the divide between these two modes of analysis, the second section asks whether this silence should be taken to mean that they are in fact irreconcilable approaches, or whether there are potential points of intersection between the two. Taking the latter possibility seriously, the third section attempts a synthesis between these two schools of thought, arguing that a feminist-rational choice approach would entail focusing on gender, strategy, institutions, power, and change. The analytical benefits of this synthesis are then illustrated with reference to four areas of research: gender quotas and women's legislative behavior, core topics in feminist analysis, and bargaining and 'tipping' models, central to the literature on rational choice. The paper concludes with reflections on the scope and limits of a synthesis between feminist and rational choice perspectives.

Rethinking Political Analysis: Feminism and Rational Choice Theory

Feminist and rational choice approaches issue fundamental challenges to existing modes of political analysis. Although each school is characterized by a diverse range of views, they are united in their efforts to produce better knowledge of the political world. At a minimum, feminist scholars argue that this entails incorporating 'gender' as an analytic category, expanding existing definitions of 'politics,' and generating insights that may be used to pursue some degree of political change. Doing better research for rational choice theorists involves connecting micro-level interactions to macro-level processes and events, paying attention to how individuals make choices within constraints and often in relation to projections about the probable actions of others. Despite these general trends, however, it is crucial to recognize significant variations within feminism and rational choice theory, which affect the prospects for a dialogue across these two approaches. Feminism appears in liberal, radical, and postmodern guises, while rational choice theory takes on the form of game theory and

social choice theory, which confer different priorities to the role of non-cooperative and cooperative strategic interaction.

Feminist Approaches in Political Science

Feminist research aims to transform the study and practice of politics (Ackerly, Stern, and True 2006; Hawkesworth 2006). For many scholars, the key contribution of this line of work is the concept of ‘gender.’ Although this term is often elided with ‘women’ in popular and scholarly discourse (cf. Carver 1996), feminist research is careful to distinguish between ‘sex,’ biological differences between women and men, and ‘gender,’ social meanings given to these distinctions. A shift to gender has two broad implications for political research: (1) it moves the analytical focus away from biological sex, which treats men and women as binary opposites, to constructed gender identities, which view masculinity and femininity as features that exist along a continuum, often in combination with other identities, and (2) it replaces exclusive concern with women in politics and public policy with attention to the impact of masculinities and femininities, as well as relations between men and women, on political inputs and outcomes (Childs and Krook 2006a). Given women’s ongoing exclusion from the political sphere, focusing on ‘women’ continues to remain crucial for mapping patterns of political access, behaviors, and effects. However, theories of gender offer a chance to delve more deeply into these dynamics by exploring masculinities and femininities, as well as the relative status of men and women, in the conduct of political life.

A second core concern among feminists is to broaden existing definitions of what is meant by ‘politics.’ Political scientists tend to employ this term mainly to refer to formal political processes related to government and elections. For this reason, they often define concepts like ‘democracy’ in relation to the presence of particular types of formal institutions (cf. O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Przeworski 1991). However, social movement activism in recent decades has led scholars to theorize

and explore at least two additional meanings of ‘politics.’ Women’s movement activists in particular have played a key role in these shifts. On the one hand, they have expanded its range to encompass informal politics and the dynamics of everyday life. They insist, for example, that social movements are a form of political participation on par with engagement inside the state (Baldez 2002; Beckwith 2007). At the same time, feminists draw attention to the power relations that permeate all levels of social life, include relations within the private sphere of home and family. For them, ‘the personal is political’ (Okin 1979; Squires 1999). On the other hand, feminists along with postmodern theorists have also adopted a broader notion of ‘politics’ as any instance or manifestation of power relations (Butler 1990; Foucault 1995). They are thus interested not only in the politics of the state and the politics of social movements, but also in the politics of language, the politics of exchange, and the politics of representation, to give but a few examples.

A third element of feminist research is a commitment to political change. In some instances, this goal is used as an argument against feminist work on the grounds that it fails to be ‘objective,’ as political motives interfere with the discovery of ‘truth’ (Hammersley and Gomm 1997). In response to such critiques, feminist epistemologists argue for recognizing the situated and partial nature of all knowledge claims (Haraway 1991), with some even suggesting that perspectives of the marginalized should be drawn upon as a resource for generating more valid knowledge about the world (Hartsock 1983; Harding 2004). Whatever their methodological commitments – which may range from broad acceptance of the existing tools of the discipline, a position known as feminist empiricism (Harding 1986), to attempts to explore and devise new methods of analysis (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007; Reinharz 1992) – feminist scholars converge on the opinion that research should contribute to some type of positive transformation, whether this entails the broad empowerment of women as a group or the simple deconstruction of gendered categories in public policy.¹

¹ We are grateful to Laura Rosenbury for helping us nuance this point about the goals of feminist analysis.

However, the exact meaning of ‘change’ varies across different kinds of feminism. Liberal feminists focus mainly on equality, seeking to gain rights for women that are already guaranteed to men. They argue that achieving concrete gains requires engaging with formal politics. Although this sphere has traditionally been dominated by men, they contend, there is nothing inherent about this domination. For this reason, they anticipate that as more and more women enter the public realm, the gendered nature of politics and public policy can be overcome to create equality for all. Radical feminists, in contrast, emphasize difference, aiming to focus on and value women as women, rather than as individuals who aspire to a male standard. As such, they are much more skeptical about the value of participating in ‘politics as usual,’ which they argue is inherently patriarchal and thus could never be employed to pursue feminist ends. They insist that even in instances where states do seem to respond to women’s demands – for example, by opening up access to women and discussion on women’s issues – this inclusion is not good for women in the longer term, as it serves to perpetuate patriarchal power relations. They prefer strategies that revalue the feminine, foster solidarity among women, and raise awareness of women’s experiences through collective consciousness-raising. This attention to difference is taken up by postmodern feminists, who focus on the role of representation in the creation of categories like ‘women’ and ‘men.’ Theorizing the fluid and relational aspects of identity and experience, they stress the contradictions and multiplicities inherent in definitions of women and women’s issues. While this approach avoids the charges of essentialism that have been directed towards liberal and radical feminism, it also has the effect of undermining the prospects for mobilizing by women as women for social, economic, and political change (cf. Kantola 2006; Squires 1999). The challenge of feminism to existing modes of political analysis is thus varied, despite the shared goals of feminists to incorporate gender, expand politics, and promote change.

Rational choice as an approach in political science has been referred to variously as a paradigm, a research program, a theory, a methodology, and a map (Ferejohn 2003; Green and Shapiro 1994; Levi 1997; MacDonald 2003; Monroe 1991). Despite this diversity, these terms suggest that rational choice theorists aim to enact a fundamental shift in the form and content of political analysis, focused on producing parsimonious statements of complex issues and processes and generating testable hypotheses within explicit scope conditions (Moe 2005; Levi 1997). The first step in this endeavor is to ascribe ‘rationality’ to all individual actors in a given model of a political phenomenon. This assumption is a central point of contention in critiques of this approach on the grounds that individuals do not always – and perhaps even rarely – act in an instrumentally rational manner (cf. Green and Shapiro 1994). For rational choice theorists, this postulate is best understood as an analytical choice rather than a psychological claim: only insofar as it is assumed that all humans act purposefully, meaning that their actions are neither completely random nor entirely pre-determined, is it possible to begin to generalize about empirical patterns in their behavior as it is governed by situational or institutional constraints (Ferejohn 2003; Riker and Ordeshook 1973). The theory thus contains no a priori prescription of goal orientations or motivations for behavior: no restrictions are placed on the substance of preferences or goals, which may include altruism or general welfare considerations, as well as selfish or pecuniary ends (Ferejohn 2003; Levi 1997; Osborne 2005; Riker and Ordeshook 1973). To be considered ‘rational,’ preference orderings are simply understood to be both complete and transitive: the options are actually comparable in the mind of the individual² and the preference orderings fit together in a logically consistent way³ (Osborne 2005; Riker and Ordeshook 1973). In its most simplified form, therefore, rationality is simply adopted as a way of connecting individuals to their actions, establishing an analytic base from

² The subject either prefers A to B, or B to A, or is indifferent between the two of them.

³ If the subject prefers A to B and B to C, then by transitivity, he or she must also prefer A to C.

which it is possible to proceed in making claims about the world.

Once assumptions of rationality are applied to model individual-level incentives, the goal of rational choice analysis is to link these motives to specify the institutions and structures that ‘cause’ aggregate outcomes. Indeed, this approach is most powerful under very structured circumstances, as variance in these constraints often holds greater explanatory weight than differences in beliefs and preferences (Ferejohn 2003; Ferejohn and Satz 1995; Levi 1997; Satz and Ferejohn 1994). While this methodological individualism is borrowed from economics, therefore, there is an acute appreciation by rational choice theorists in political science of the political nature of the mechanisms by which individual actions are translated into social outcomes (Arrow 1951; Olsen 1965). Examples of such constraints and mechanisms include rules governing interactions between players, institutions and norms, and risk and beliefs, all of which may be affected by the possibility of asymmetries in the information available to particular individuals (cf. Weingast 2002). These structures are central in shaping how individuals act strategically with one another, as well as how group decision-making occurs, and thus in the process of transforming micro-level behavior into macro-level outcomes.

Ideas about rationality and action within constraints inform two main branches of rational choice inquiry, which present distinct sets of assumptions about how strategic interaction take place (Cudd 2001). Both approaches developed out of decision theory, which addresses decision-making processes of individuals isolated from interaction with other individuals. The first is game theory, also known as ‘non-cooperative game theory,’ which assumes that individuals interact strategically with other individually rational agents to achieve their most preferred outcome. Many of these models explore the extent to which structural features of a game, such as game sequence, agenda control, or information asymmetry increase or reduce likelihood of coordination or cooperation being realized (Osborne 2005). The second is social choice theory, sometimes described as ‘cooperative game theory,’ which stipulates theories and characterizations of collective decision

making (Arrow 1951; Riker 1963; Riker and Ordeshook 1973). A common topic in this literature is coalition bargaining and behavior, with a special interest in the stability and likelihood of consensus among different coalitional constellations (Laver and Shepsle 1996; McKelvey 1979; Schofield 1979; Tsebelis 2002). These analyses are frequently concerned with specifying the ‘social choice function,’ i.e., the aggregation mechanism through which individual preferences are translated into collective outputs, and the politics behind its determination, especially in cases where micro-level preferences do not appear to match up with macro-level outcomes, which may be unintended and undesirable (Arrow 1951; Ferejohn 2003; Hechter and Kanazawa 1997; Olsen 1965). Scholars have thus applied and adapted the rational choice framework in a variety of different ways, but its advocates converge in their commitment to theorize from micro-processes to macro-structures, emphasizing the role of rational action, choice within constraints, and calculations taking into account the projected actions of others (Weingast 1996; Levi 1997).

Explaining the Divide: Feminism versus Rational Choice Theory

Feminism and rational choice theory thus share a concern to rethink, at a fundamental level, existing modes of political analysis. Despite these similar ambitions to revolutionize political science, work that applies these two perspectives rarely intersects. For the most part, studies in each vein are simply silent on the other approach. Research in related disciplines offers some insights into reasons for possible skepticism across these two schools of thought. However, it also reveals several ways in which scholars have implicitly engaged with the other approach across this apparent divide, often in the course of seeking to answer substantively, and often theoretically, important questions that have been difficult to resolve within the confines of each single approach. Thus, while the general lack of engagement across feminism and rational choice theory seems to indicate that they are irreconcilable

approaches, these rare moments point to the possible benefits of rapprochement in terms of gaining better knowledge about the political world.

Feminist Views of Rational Choice

Claims regarding the virtues of rational choice have been met with suspicion, at best, among feminist political scientists. Although a few scholars consider how rational choice frameworks might inform feminist work (Campbell 2006; Krook and Squires 2006), most offer short discussions that tend to dismiss its utility for feminist analysis (Kenny and Paantjens 2006; Lawless and Fox 2005). Possible reasons for this lack of engagement can be seen in the range of explicit critiques of rational choice theory developed by feminist scholars in other disciplines. Despite their different points of reference, they share the opinion that rational choice theory is often sexist, in the sense that many of its “particular exemplifications deny to women, or to ‘feminine’ persons, the status of independent rational agents” (Anderson 2001, 369), and androcentric, to the degree that it “assumes that the experiences, biology, and social roles of males or men are the norm and that of females or women a deviation from the norm” (Cudd 2001, 403). In most cases, these orientations are implicit and often unconscious, echoing broader tendencies in Western thought to associate terms like ‘universal’ and ‘neutral’ with the particular needs and views of men as a group (Okin 1979; Young 1989).

In the field of economics, feminist critiques focus on three broad issues: features attributed to the rational agent at the center of economic modeling, definitions of ‘economics’ that exclude or overlook non-market activities, and deference to particular normative views of gender relations that justify inequalities between women and men. Feminist economists are especially wary of the central character of economic analysis, described as a rational, autonomous, self-interest agent who makes choices within exogenous imposed constraints and trades with other agents in order to maximize a utility or profit function. This model, according to them, assumes that individuals are “independent

agents and unique selves” and “able and responsible for taking care of their own needs” (Strassman 1993, 60); in other words, “economic man springs up fully formed, with preferences fully developed, and is fully active and self-contained” (Nelson 1995, 135). They dispute the usefulness of this type of actor as the most objective starting point for economic analysis, arguing that the neglect of the social and emotional dimensions of human behavior should be considered a serious limitation. They point out, moreover, that “models of free individual choice are not adequate to analyze behavior fraught with issues of dependence, interdependence, tradition, and power” (Ferber and Nelson 1993, 6).

Feminists express related concerns regarding traditional definitions of ‘economics,’ in at least two senses. First, there is a tendency in mainstream economic analyses to focus on market activities, which has the effect of excluding attention to many non-market activities – for example, care of the home, children, elderly, and the sick – that are not only often performed by women, but which are also often crucial to the smooth operation of the market itself (Nelson 1995). Second, many models draw a distinction between behavior in the market, where individuals are assumed to act strategically, and dynamics within the family, where they are believed to act altruistically (Nelson 1993). When the family is incorporated into economic analysis, as in Gary Becker’s *A Treatise on the Family* (1981), the study tends to draw on specific views of gender relations to emphasize the economic advantages of the traditional family, explaining the sexual division of labor as the result of rational calculations to maximize utility and thus as economically optimal. In many of these models, all decisions are made by the head of the family, whose decisions are accepted by all other family members as being in their own best interest. A considerable feminist literature criticizes this approach (for a review, see Ferber 2003), on the grounds that it draws on questionable arguments about economic efficiency to justify patterns of gender inequality.

Feminist philosophers present a slightly different set of objections to rational choice theory. They note that since the time of the Greeks, but especially since the Enlightenment, Western ideas

about 'rationality' have tended to exclude women from the exercise of reason. According to René Descartes (1999), the mind and reason were the only way to grasp the nature of the world which, because it was fundamentally ordered and logical, could be accessed through a single and identical method that separated the mind, a conscious being, and matter, its objects of knowledge. Descartes himself felt that this method was accessible to all, but other Enlightenment thinkers, most notably Immanuel Kant (1991) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1987), declared that women were incapable of reason on the grounds that they were closer to 'nature' than men. This is because, at a metaphorical level, distinctions between mind/body and reason/emotion have been mapped onto the dualism of male/female (Bordo 1987; Gatens 1991). These associations have tended to delegitimize women as 'knowers,' based on views that women are more closely tied to their bodies and emotions, a relation that contaminates any 'objective' knowledge that they may generate about the world (Jaggar 1989; Lloyd 1993). Despite this general feminist skepticism regarding such discourses of reason and objectivity, Raia Prokhovnik (1999) argues that the notion of 'rational woman' need not be viewed as a contradiction in terms. For this to be possible, however, it is necessary to break down existing dualisms through an extended conception of reason that encompasses emotions, a revised view of corporeality that recognizes the embodied nature of the knower, and a shift to more relational and interdependent modes of thinking, away from ideas about dichotomy and separation. Similarly, despite early work that argued against the utility of formal logic for feminist research (Nye 1990), a collection of recent studies suggests that it is a mistake to single out abstraction or formalism per se as an instrument of epistemic oppression (Falmagne and Hass 2002).

In sociology, finally, feminist critiques of rational choice theory generally pull together these two sets of concerns. Paula England (1989) equates this approach with neoclassical economics and objects to rational choice models on the grounds that they assume a 'separative self' as opposed to an 'emotionally connected self.' Her argument draws on feminist work in psychology showing that

men are socialized more in terms of separation, while women are socialized more in terms of their connections with others (cf. Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982). She identifies four major assumptions of rational choice: individuals act on the basis of self-interest, interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible, tastes are exogenous to economic models, and individuals are rational. Reading these through the lens of feminist critiques of the separative model of self, she maintains that rational choice models thus do not enable exploration of altruism or action done from the desire for social approval, overlook the role of empathy and connection in making comparisons of utility, fail to recognize how tastes may change as individuals move in interaction with others, and ignore the fact that people often lack the necessary information and cognitive abilities to make correct calculations (for a detailed rebuttal of these points, see Friedman and Diem 1993). She concludes, therefore, that “social theories that assume a separative self are inaccurate models of some possible and actual social arrangements, though they claim to be generic” (England 1989, 17).

Based on these various discussions, it is clear to see that feminists in a range of disciplines are hesitant to engage with rational choice theory on the grounds that it employs concepts that are informed by patriarchal assumptions and, in some cases, serves to ‘rationalize’ behavior that justifies the maltreatment of women. Nonetheless, several feminist scholars in political science have drawn on rational choice frameworks to great effect, as a means for unraveling what appear to be puzzling patterns of feminist concern. Anna Harvey (1998), for example, seeks to explain the sudden surges in the passage of policies related to women’s rights in the 1920s and then again in the 1970s. These variations, she argues, are due not to the personal choices of women themselves, but instead to the legacy of women’s delayed suffrage, which had an impact on patterns of political participation and representation long after women gained the right to vote. She starts from the assumption that there is no direct relationship between voter preferences and the passage of policies that promote their political interests; rather, voters’ leverage over policy requires some sort of coordination by policy-

seeking interest groups. At the same time, Harvey suggests, groups that enter the political game earlier tend to be privileged over those that emerge subsequently, because the former are able to establish a set of institutions and practices that make it difficult for other groups to later break into the political game. In the United States, the party system was established long before women's suffrage, which has meant that female voters have not been able to directly transform their voting rights into the passage of public policy beneficial to women as a group. Rather, parties have made women's issues a priority only at moments when elites believed that women constituted a distinct and significant electoral group and they were being publicly threatened by women's organizations with electoral retaliation if their demands were not met, conditions that were met only in the 1920s, following the suffrage movement, and then later in the 1970s, with the emergence of second wave feminism. Harvey's study thus employs the tools of rational choice theory, namely ideas about the structures and interests that shape human behavior, which help connect micro-level interactions to macro-level processes and events. However, her application of these tools is also informed and motivated by feminist concerns to recognize the role of gender in shaping the terms of women's engagement in the formal political sphere, an exercise which calls attention to the broad political-structural reasons behind the exclusion of women's issues from the realm of political debate.

Rational Choice Views of Feminism

Feminism as an intellectual and political project, in turn, has found few advocates among rational choice theorists. This reception has mainly involved silence, rather than any type of outright opposition. To the degree that 'gender' is mentioned, it tends to be treated as synonymous with the study of 'identity' (Akerlof and Kranton 2000; Calvert 2002), or alternatively, excluded from explicit consideration, for example by analyzing dynamics of enfranchisement solely in terms of universal male suffrage (Johnson 2005; see Paxton 2000 for the theoretical implications of such an approach).

One plausible explanation for these patterns is that issues of identification and expression are often viewed as irreconcilable with rational choice accounts of human behavior. As Randall Calvert (2002) notes, some of the seminal works in rational choice theory reframe issues of identity and expression in terms of choice phenomena: Anthony Downs (1957) treats partisanship and ideology as ‘rules of thumb’ rather than more meaningful forms of political identification, while Mancur Olson (1965) theorizes collective action in terms of selfish maximization and mutual monitoring rather than a sense of mutual obligation and belonging. Taken together, these studies suggest that there may be no viable analytical space in a rational choice framework for introducing the concept of gender, much less new definitions of politics or a commitment to political change.

Nonetheless, as Calvert (2002) points out, a significant body of subsequent rational choice research has addressed identity-oriented topics like voting participation, partisanship and ideology, and ethnic politics and ethnic violence. One segment treats identity and expressive motivations as given features of individual preferences, which are then examined in rational choice terms. Examples include work on voting that seeks to go beyond viewing it as purely instrumental by recognizing that individuals may vote to express solidarity with a group, affirm allegiance to a party, enjoy performing a civil duty, or establish their own political identity (Fiorina 1976; Schuessler 2000). A second group of analyses construct rational choice models to explore the nature and effects of identity in terms of how it unfolds within the context of social interaction. An illustration of this approach can be seen in David Laitin’s (1998) study of ethnic Russians who suddenly find themselves as a minority group following the independence of many of the former republics of the Soviet Union. Confronted with the choice of assimilating into the larger society or maintaining a separate identity, individuals are more likely to opt for assimilation, Laitin argues, when doing so confers economic advantages, does not harm one’s status inside the group, and results in acceptance by members of the other group. This ‘tipping model’ thus combines instrumental economic incentives with some recognition of the

independent value of cultural identification. As such, Calvert concludes, “rational-choice models do not contradict the existence of identity and expression,” and “properly formulated, can be a valuable addition to social science’s tools for studying those phenomena” (Calvert 2002, 570). All the same, he concedes that many rational choice theories present an inherently ‘under-socialized’ model of human behavior. For this reason, he argues that these frameworks require “supplementation in order to give a full accounting of identity and expressive phenomena, as well as other features of social life” (Calvert 2002, 593).

Although few political scientists have drawn on rational choice theory to study topics related to gender and politics, several studies done by economists illustrate how these tools might be applied to feminist ends. The range of these projects is wide, covering issues like marriage (Cherry 2003), occupational segregation (Akerlof and Kranton 2000), and sexual assault (Bachman, Paternoster, and Ward 1992). Going beyond studies that incorporate gender but perpetuate sexist assumptions about women (Becker 1981; Fréchette, Maniquet, and Morelli 2007), these examples offer insight into the power dynamics that perpetuate patterns of gender inequality, which they draw on these to generate prescriptions for change. A classic study by Kristin Luker (1975), for example, examines the sexual and contraceptive choices of women who sought abortion services in the early 1970s. She seeks to understand why the vast majority of women in her sample were voluntarily sexually active, did not want to be pregnant, and had knowledge about various means of preventing pregnancy, but were not using effective contraception. Attempting to overcome perceptions that these women were simply irrational, Luker theorizes their choices in terms of multiple motivations which ‘make sense’ from the point of view of agents, who may be assigning a high cost to contraceptive use, some benefits to becoming pregnant, and a low probability of pregnancy from their sexual activities. Understanding how particular norms of gender affect subjects’ cost-benefit analysis, in turn, offers a way forward in terms of pursuing policy change to reduce the rate of contraceptive risk-taking.

A second example is Gerry Mackie's (1996) account of the campaign to end foot-binding in China. Motivated by current discussions on female genital mutilation (FGM), he seeks to model why such practices exist and the conditions that might enable their demise. He theorizes both types of practices in terms of self-reinforcing conventions, which perpetuate themselves as a set of rational responses to behaviors and preferences in the marriage market. While this framework appears to 'rationalize' practices of violence against women, Mackie then uses this knowledge to explore the conditions under which it was possible to disrupt the equilibrium underlying the practice of foot-binding, as a means for developing more effective strategies for ending the practice of FGM. A third and final illustration is George A. Akerlof, Janet L. Yellen, and Michael L. Katz's (1996) analysis of out-of-wedlock childbearing in the United States. They describe the availability and legalization of abortion as a 'technological shock' which reduces the cost to women for engaging in pre-marital sex, but also grants to men a new set of options regarding fatherhood and responsibility for their children's welfare. As such, abortion offers women a 'physical choice' over their own fertility, but also confers a 'social choice' to men as to whether or not they want to get married and participate in raising their own children. Although this model might be used as an argument against women's right to abortion, the authors emphasize instead the need for men to be encouraged to contribute to the care of their children, recognizing that these dynamics are a key factor contributing to the feminization of poverty in the U.S. All three of these studies, therefore, are shaped and inspired by core elements of feminist analysis, recognizing not only that "gender identity...changes the 'payoffs' from different actions" (Akerlof and Kranton 2000, 716-717), but also the need to provide insights as to possible ways to promote an alternative that improves the well-being of both women and men. At the same time, they contribute to new modes of rational choice theorizing by further elaborating the source and content of micro-level behaviors that produce broader patterns of gender inequality.

Devising a Synthesis: A Feminist-Rational Choice Approach

These examples suggest that a conversation across feminism and rational choice theory may offer new traction on some central questions in political science. Such a project shares similar goals as recent attempts to explore potential intersections between rational choice and more historically-informed modes of analysis (Bates et al 1998; Katznelson and Weingast 2005). Feminist scholars in other disciplines, however, point to a range of different grounds and anticipated gains for engaging with rational choice. Janet A. Seiz (1995), for example, recommends a combination of feminism and game theory to model the bargaining processes that occur inside the household. Such an approach, she argues, would render visible the cooperative and the conflictual aspects of family relationships, as well as focus on the external or structural factors that produce unequal outcomes for women and men. Anne De Bruin and Ann Dupuis (1999), on the other hand, suggest using ideas about bounded rationality to model how trust among female vendors serves to reduce transaction costs in economic exchange. Feminist philosophers like Elizabeth Anderson (2001) and Ann E. Cudd (2001) call for incorporating social norms of gender and gender relations into the study of individuals' choices and calculations, as a means for devising better public policies and services attuned to women's needs. Scholars like Debra Friedman and Carol Diem (1993) echo these calls, but also propose exploring how rational choice ideas about institutional constraints, opportunity costs, and preferences might be utilized to uncover some of the dynamics behind women's marginalization.

Among feminist political scientists, Moira Gatens (1998) is one of the few to state explicitly what might be gained from a dialogue across these approaches. In her view, "a critical feminist analysis can show that the assumptions central to rational actor versions of theories of institutional design unwittingly obscure the specificity of women's social situation," at the same time that "the rational actor approach in public policy contexts may help to highlight how and why our institutions are so resistant to reshaping" (Gatens 1998, 2). Taken together, these views indicate that five elements

would be central to a feminist-rational choice approach: gender, strategy, institutions, power, and change.⁴ While this synthesis incorporates ideas elaborated extensively within each camp, namely ‘gender’ and ‘change’ for feminists and ‘strategy’ for rational choice theorists, it also includes two notions, ‘institutions’ and ‘power,’ that have been a shared concern. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that this effort to combine frameworks does not imply that all feminists and rational choice theorists would come on board with this new approach. As signaled above, there is considerable diversity within and across these modes of analysis. The greatest barrier to synthesis, however, is most likely to relate to differing opinions on the value of positivism: while rational choice theory is sometimes framed as the quintessential positivist approach in political science, to the point that it is described as ‘positive political theory’ (Austen-Smith and Banks 1999; Riker and Ordeshook 1973), many feminists consider their work to be non- or post-positivist (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002; Tickner 2005), even if many also work squarely within a positivist frame (Chafetz 2004). The aim of this synthesis is not to take a specific position on positivism, but rather to open up consideration of a wide range of methods that might be employed in a ‘problem-driven’ way to incorporate attention to questions of gender, strategy, institutions, power, and change.

Elements of a Feminist-Rational Choice Approach

The discussion thus far points to individual and shared elements of feminism and rational choice theory that could be combined to forge a common approach. From feminism, an obvious contribution is the concept of *gender*. A well-known definition explains that “gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott 1988, 42). As a result, “[g]ender norms support a status quo in which one party is placed in a position of advantage and power in relation to

⁴ The identification of these particular elements are inspired by – but seek to extend – Meryl Kenny and Marjolein Paantjen’s (2006) argument that a ‘feminist institutionalism’ would incorporate attention to gender, power, and change.

the other party and this situation is itself presented as the ‘natural order of things’ rather than as an exercise of power” (Gatens 1998, 5). Despite the centrality of this category, feminists disagree with one another as to what gender ‘is,’ with some arguing that gender is something that people ‘have’ and others framing it instead as something that people ‘do’ (cf. Butler 1990; Connell 1987). Still others describe it as an institution as a means for capturing the enduring nature – and social origins – of gendered ideas and practices (Lorber 1994; Martin 2004). Attention to gender thus intersects in many ways with institutions and power, but is not entirely reducible to either phenomenon. By way of contrast, most rational choice models conceal rather than clarify how dynamics of gender shape the decisions and actions of individuals. From a feminist perspective, therefore, these analyses ‘get it wrong’ when it comes to understanding the nature of the problem at hand, because they cannot capture core features of individuals’ “psychological and affective dispositions that feed into their ‘rational’ calculation” (Gatens 1998, 9). Incorporating gender thus offers important leverage for rational choice theorists in terms of beginning to understand the origin and nature of values that motivate human behavior (cf. Hechter and Kanazawa 1997).

A second key element for a feminist-rational choice approach is *strategy*. In a review of the basic features of rational choice theory, Margaret Levi (1997) identifies ‘strategic interaction’ as one of its four core features, along with the assumption of rationality, the forms of constraint, and the search for equilibrium solutions. For Levi, being strategic simply involves considering what others will do before making choices, taking into account expectations about other actors. Strategy thus assumes a crucial role in the translation of micro-level actions into macro-level outcomes. Because these interactions often involve less-than-complete information, institutions – both formal and informal – may serve as cues as to appropriate behavior and a framework in which action is more broadly understood. Although questions of strategy are frequently raised in the context of feminist research (cf. Beckwith 2007; Matland and Studlar 1996), feminist scholars rarely theorize strategy per

se. The opportunity to think more explicitly about how individuals' choices are shaped by beliefs about the behavior of others may thus push feminist scholars to formalize their intuitions in relation to a host of topics that have often – and that have rarely – been viewed through a strategic lens.

A third component is *institutions*. These are often understood in terms of the formal features of political systems, like political parties, electoral systems, and government bodies. However, they may also involve procedures, routines, conventions, norms, and cognitive scripts that also structure political life, often as if they were formal rules (North 1990; March and Olsen 1989). Many feminist projects recognize the importance of political institutions. However, they largely restrict their focus to the gendered nature of formal institutions (Chappell 2006; Hawkesworth 2003; Kenney 1996), although some scholars discuss gendered practices and norms in ways that can be seen as consistent with definitions of informal institutions (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995; cf. Kenny 2007). Many argue that while all institutions are gendered, they may also be used to reform or reinforce existing patterns of gender inequality (Lovenduski 1998), such that attention to institutions in comparative research may go far in explaining variations in gendered policy patterns (Chappell 2006; Lindvert 2007). To the degree that feminists engage with institutionalist frameworks, however, they tend to view the most promising point of intersection as historical rather than rational choice versions (Kenny and Paantjens 2006; Waylen 2008; cf. Jennings 1993). Yet, as outlined above, rational choice theorists also give a central role to institutions in their attempts to explain various political phenomena. They approach institutions as exogenous and endogenous, exploring the effects of individual institutions and asking why particular institutions emerge and survive (Weingast 2002). The goal is generally to understand how institutions affect sequences of interaction, the choices available to particular actors, the structures of information and beliefs, and the payoffs to individuals and groups. Shared interest in the role of institutions suggests an important theoretical overlap in the concerns of feminism and rational choice theory, even though these approaches rarely intersect in practice.

A fourth element is *power*. As Joan Wallach Scott's (1988) definition of gender outlined above suggests, feminists are keenly aware of relations of power and how pervasive they are in shaping the dynamics of political life, including the boundaries drawn around what is considered to be 'political.' As such, a feminist perspective requires close attention to questions of power, which are central to – but often underplayed – in other types of political analysis (cf. Kenny 2007). In contrast, power is often a peripheral component in most applications of rational choice theory, mainly because of a tendency to view political institutions as structures of voluntary cooperation that resolve collective action problems and benefit all concerned (cf. Knight 1992; Miller 2005). As Terry Moe points out, however, the political processes that generate institutions tend to create structures that are good for some people but bad for others, depending on which group has strength and authority to impose its will. Issues of power are compounded by the difficulty of exit from political arrangements:

“In the voluntaristic framework of the new economics...people who expect to lose from any proposed institutional arrangement *can simply walk away*. This is what guarantees (in theory) that such structures will be mutually beneficial. The losers don't have to participate. But in democratic politics, *they can't leave*, at least not unless they are prepared to leave the country, which is typically not a practical option. So when they lose under the democratic rules of the game, they have to suffer the consequences – and the winners are well aware of this” (Moe 2006, 38-39, emphasis in original).

These observations are echoed by Suzanne Dovi (2007), who notes that democratic institutions have been oppressive to women both at moments when they prohibited women from holding office, and later, as women have ruled and been ruled unequally due to the significant under-representation of women in elected politics. Bringing in a focus on power is thus vital to a feminist-rational choice

approach, which can in turn inform both literatures by modeling how power operates in different contexts, whether these entail instances of obvious coercion or more subtle dynamics of exclusion.

A fifth and final facet of a feminist-rational choice approach is an emphasis on *change*. As mentioned above, one of the central goals of feminist research is to promote some degree of change, whether this entails empowering women as a group or deconstructing representations of gender in public policy. This orientation requires that research contribute to positive transformation. Although feminist work is full of examples of ways in which gender norms can be disrupted through strategic engagements with political institutions (Chappell 2006; Lovenduski et al 2005), studies that employ rational choice theory tend to focus more on stability, viewing moments of change in terms of a transition between equilibrium orders (Bates, de Figueiredo, and Weingast 1998). However, these two concerns can come together in a feminist-rational choice approach. As previously noted, once institutions are created, they are reinforced through power relations that privilege certain groups at the expense of others. Yet, the mere act of uncovering this dynamic opens up the possibility of an alternative: “understanding institutional evolution and change lies in specifying more precisely the reproduction and feedback mechanisms on which particular institutions rest...for it is there that we will find clues as to the particular external processes that can produce political opening and change” (Thelen 1999, 400; cf. Kenny 2007). A feminist-rational choice framework thus not only promises to improve political research, but also brings with it the potential for broader political transformation.

Applications for a Feminist-Rational Choice Approach

Four brief examples demonstrate what might be gained from this synthesis of feminist and rational choice approaches. Although each literature is diverse, it is possible to identify core topics within each whose study could be further elaborated using these theoretical tools. This discussion, however, is not meant to be exhaustive; many additional topics could be identified. One key area of

feminist research concerns questions of candidate selection. Although women form more than half the population, they continue to form only a small minority of all political representatives. To many observers, this pattern is puzzling as women have had the right to vote in most countries for several decades, at the same time that recent years have witnessed substantial transformations in the social and economic status of women as a group. Scholars have approached this question from a variety of different angles, but most argue women's under-representation stems from a combination of women being less likely to come forward as candidates (Lawless and Fox 2005) and elites being less willing to select the women who do (Niven 1998; cf. Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Over the last several years, however, more than 100 countries have seen the adoption of gender quota policies aimed at increasing the number of female candidates, albeit with varying effects (Krook 2007). Many of these measures have been passed unanimously or nearly unanimously by male-dominated legislatures and political parties. However, few scholars have offered persuasive – and substantiated⁵ – explanations of why male elites might approve a measure that is fundamentally against their self-interests: for the number of women to increase, the proportion of men must decrease. This pattern is puzzling as well from a rational choice perspective, which since Downs (1957) has tended to explain the behavior of legislators in relation to their desire to be re-elected. Combining the tools of feminism and rational choice theory, it is possible to begin to theorize what may be occurring in these cases by exploring the gendered nature of access of political office, the strategic motivations that may lead male elites to recognize advantages to quota adoption, the role of existing institutions of candidate selection and the degree to which their effects are altered or reinforced through quotas, the unequal balance of

⁵ One attempt to explain quota adoption in France has been offered by Fréchette, Maniquet, and Morelli (2007), but it rests on an erroneous (and sexist) assumption that female candidates are inherently less desirable to voters than male candidates, especially incumbents. Confirming a host of international research, a more nuanced study by Murray (2007) reveals women are in fact more likely to win, especially in contests involving male incumbents, when controlling for the 'winnability' of the particular district.

power that enables men to determine the conditions of women's access to the political system, and the potential for particular quota policies to disrupt earlier dynamics of exclusion.

A second set of empirical puzzles in feminist political science relates to links between the descriptive and substantive representation of women. This work seeks to understand whether an increase in the number of women in political office will translate into an increase in attention to women's policy concerns. A substantial body of research finds that women have distinct political priorities from men (Childs 2004; Swers 1998) and female politicians tend to view themselves as representatives of women as a group (Carroll 2002; Schwartz 2004). All the same, many studies also observe that higher numbers of women do not always result in the passage of policies beneficial to women (Reingold 2000); indeed, women may be more effective when they are few (Crowley 2004). Recent work suggests that understanding these patterns may require shifting from asking questions about what 'women' do towards analyzing what specific women do, for example by exploring the role played by 'critical actors' in creating momentum for policy change (Chaney 2006; Childs and Krook 2006b). In many senses, this situation resembles a collective action problem: female legislators hesitate to act on behalf of women as a group, sometimes because they don't prioritize 'women's issues,' but often because they fear not being regarded as 'serious politicians' (Childs 2004) or repercussions from party leaders for breaching party discipline (Crowley and Childs 2003), situations less familiar to male politicians who often do not have to prove themselves as good representatives and, due to patterns of socialization and encouragement, tend have more confidence and political experience (cf. Lawless and Fox 2005). Drawing on a mix of feminism and rational choice theory would thus go far in explaining why women do not always appear to represent women, even when they identify women's issues as a crucial area of policy concern. Such an approach would employ gender as a lens for framing women's access to and behavior in elected office; explore the strategic decisions made by female office-holders, including in relation to male

legislators; take into account the rules, practices, and norms that constrain and offer opportunities for women to act for women; recognize the power dynamics at work within formal political institutions that lead some issues but not others to be deemed ‘important;’ and search for the conditions under which women are able to articulate women’s policy concerns.

Turning to examples from rational choice theory, there are at least two areas of research that could benefit from feminist-rational choice framework. The first concerns work on bargaining. The standard game-theoretic account of negotiation processes models interactions between two people as a bargaining game, where each player is trying to maximize his or her payoffs (Osborne 2005; Dixit and Skeath 2004). The actor characteristics frequently explored include the players’ baseline take away value, i.e., their ‘backstop’ payment from simply walking away from the negotiation, and their discount rate and ability to prolong the negotiation proceedings, which frequently allows the players to elicit higher payoffs (Dixit and Skeath 2004, 587). Experimental evidence illustrates that individuals generally behave in accordance with the model’s expectations, but also notes patterns of divergence, such as a tendency to over-allocate out of a sense of fairness or equity (Osborne 2005, 184-5). Adding a feminist lens offers a chance to nuance this stark game-theoretic model, as well as to better theorize the social foundations behind the observed divergences from the model. Norms of gender, in particular, may significantly alter payoff structures, especially in terms of the ability to ‘hold out’ to demand a higher price, which means that the situational contexts of bargaining may lead to distinct outcomes for women and men. Research by feminists in economics, for example, shows that for a variety of reasons women ‘don’t ask’ in negotiating situations which demand self-promotion, a behavior that deprives them of substantial economic welfare and professional esteem (Babcock and Laschever 2003). Further, women and men in bargaining situations are sensitive to different structural features of the negotiation process, such as information and coordinating focal points, but the disparity between men and women disappears when bargaining situations are highly

structured and ‘reasonable’ requests are made clear (Babcock et al. 2005). In this context, therefore, exclusive attention to strategic interaction is insufficient; it is necessary to incorporate gender as a central category of analysis, recognize the role played by institutions in structuring incentives and behavior, theorize the dynamics of power explicit or implicit in bargaining situations, and consider how these relations might be shaped in ways that empower women in negotiation processes.

A second literature involves rational choice research on collective action. In addition to the framework put forward by Olson (1965), early work on this topic focused on ‘threshold effects’ or ‘tipping models,’ whereby a ‘critical mass’ of individuals acting collectively serves as a catalyst for the emergence of a larger social movement or protest. The expressed aim of many of these authors is to understand social networks and the structural conditions to achieve collective action (Granovetter 1978; Lohmann 1994; Schelling 1960). Although research on social movements is one of the most extensive in the literature on gender and politics (Beckwith 2000), there has been little engagement with this work on the part of rational choice scholars. Attending to questions of identity, especially gender, may nonetheless offer crucial insights into some of the grounds on which collective action may be based. There are not only many cases where women organize as women, and men organize as men, but it is also true that women’s political participation tends to be concentrated mainly in civil society, while men tend to dominate in parliament and the broader apparatus of the state. These gendered patterns signal a wide range of questions for rational choice models of collective action related to why women engage in social movement activities, which may be answered in various ways with reference to norms of gender that tend to exclude women from other types of political activity, strategic calculations regarding the ability of women to protest given their moral claims as mothers combined with less fear of repression from central authorities (Baldez 2002), political institutions that block or present opportunities for women to articulate their claims (Chappell 2002), dynamics of power that enable women to make some claims but also prevent them from pursuing others, and

faith in the potential for mobilization to achieve certain policy ends. This discussion, while cursory, thus points to many ways in which the tools of feminist and rational choice analysis may be brought together to ask and answer theoretically and substantively important questions in political science.

Conclusions: Feminism, Rational Choice, and Political Science

Feminism and rational choice theory have both been hailed as approaches with the potential to revolutionize political science. Apart from a few exceptions, however, work that utilizes these two perspectives rarely overlaps. This paper reviews the main contributions of feminism and rational choice theory to the study of politics and then initiates a dialogue across them in order to explore the potential for a combined approach. It argues that a synthesis of feminism and rational choice theory would involve attending to questions of gender, strategy, institutions, power, and change. The contours and benefits of this approach are then illustrated with reference to four areas of research: two core topics in feminist analysis, gender quotas and women's legislative behavior, and two central to the literature on rational choice, bargaining and 'tipping' models. These examples are intended to illustrate how studies in each vein would ask new questions, generate new models, and offer findings that present new recommendations for altering the status quo. Further research will be necessary to elaborate what such feminist-rational choice analysis would actually look like in practice. The aim of the present discussion is simply to point to promising new directions for study, given current gaps and silences in political research. While a feminist-rational choice framework may not be suitable for investigating all topics, it presents some possible solutions to enduring puzzles in political science.

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