

# Feminism and rational choice theory

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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 utilizing these two perspectives rarely overlaps. This article reviews their main contributions and explores 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 illustrated with reference to one particular area of research: the adoption of electoral gender quotas. Despite a current lack of engagement across approaches, this example illustrates that the tools of feminist and rational choice analysis may be brought together in productive ways to ask and answer theoretically and substantively important questions in political science.

**Keywords:** feminism; rational choice theory; gender quotas; Argentina

## Introduction

In recent years, proponents of two schools 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, research using these two perspectives rarely intersects. One review finds that while feminist scholars appear to be open to a wide range of methods and approaches, few utilize a rational choice framework (Krook and Squires, 2006). Other overviews note that research on gender and identity is often seen as least amenable to rational choice analysis (Calvert, 2002). This divide has been noted in a range of related disciplines, including economics (Ferber and Nelson, 1993; Seiz, 1995), philosophy (Anderson, 2001; Cudd, 2001; Thalos, 2005), and sociology (England, 1989). However, few political scientists reflect on this separation or explore the potential for mutual engagement.

This article aims to initiate such a conversation by considering what feminism and rational choice theory each brings to the study of politics and what might be

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gained by forging a combined approach. It must be acknowledged at the outset, however, that a synthesis of this nature is not likely to appeal to all scholars within both camps, given that there are adherents on each side who disagree fundamentally with one another on the philosophy of science. The main barrier stems from differing opinions on the value of positivism in social scientific research. Positivism asserts that knowledge of reality is directly accessible given the correct methods. According to this view, it is possible to use deductive reasoning to propose theories that can be tested – and subsequently revised if the theory does not fit the facts. As such, positivists are deeply committed to ‘empiricism’, or the idea that observation and measurement is required for scientific progress. Adherence to these rules, they propose, can prevent knowledge from being contaminated by the values and normative biases of individual researchers.

Rational choice theory is sometimes framed as the quintessential positivist approach in political science (Riker and Ordeshook, 1973). The aim is to systematically separate, as far as possible, what they view as empirical descriptions from normative assessments of the world (Thalos, 2005) and produce a transparent depiction of the incentive structures and institutions that organize and coordinate the dynamics of individual and social choice. In contrast, many feminists consider their work to be non- or post-positivist (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002), even if many also work within a positivist frame. They are skeptical of the positivist belief in an objective reality, noting the masculine assumptions often embedded in what are seen as ‘neutral’ political concepts (Goertz and Mazur, 2008). They thus remain unconvinced of the possibility to eliminate bias entirely from social investigation and argue that empirical research should take actors’ social situations into account.

Nevertheless, diversity within each approach suggests that many scholars may be willing to engage across this divide in productive ways. The universalistic aspirations of early rational choice analyses have been increasingly abandoned, for example, as a growing number have recognized the need to produce more qualified generalizations (Ferejohn and Satz, 1995; Hindmoor, 2011). As a result, rational choice theorists have become more pragmatic, claiming neither pure objectivity nor universal applicability (Knight and Johnson, 2007). Many acknowledge the need for socialized models of human interaction (Sen, 1993; Calvert, 2002) and advocate positivist assumptions for analytical convenience, rather than positivist dogmatism for its own sake. At the same time, many feminists are strongly committed to gaining accurate knowledge in order to promote social justice. To this end, feminist empiricists have been willing to experiment with a variety of positivist research tools – although, admittedly, these are not the only possible tools – as a means to design studies that generate valid knowledge while also remaining sensitive to feminist concerns (Krook and Squires, 2006).

While recognizing these potential obstacles, this article seeks to map out the ‘common ground’ among feminists and rational choice theorists, as well as how

their respective insights might provide useful tools for improving political analysis undertaken in each vein. The first section begins by outlining the diverse ways in which these two approaches aim to rethink the form and content of political research. The second section turns to the divide between these two modes of analysis and asks whether this silence means that they are irreconcilable approaches, or whether there are potential points of intersection between the two. Taking the latter possibility seriously, the third section attempts a synthesis, arguing that a feminist–rational choice approach to political analysis would entail research designs attentive to gender, strategy, institutions, power, and change. The fourth section illustrates the analytical benefits with reference to one area of research: the adoption of electoral gender quota policies. The article concludes that combining feminism and rational choice theory offers a new means for addressing important questions in political science through a revised focus on the dynamics at work in political life.

### **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. For rational choice theorists, this involves connecting micro-level interactions to macro-level events and processes, paying attention to how individuals make choices in relation to projections about the actions of others and in the face of risks and constraints.

#### *Feminist approaches in political science*

Feminist research aims to transform the study and practice of politics, distinguishing it from work that merely incorporates women or relations between women and men as a subject of interest (Hawkesworth, 2006). For many scholars, a key contribution is the concept of ‘gender’. Although this term is often elided with ‘women’, 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: (1) it moves the focus away from biological sex to constructed gender identities, and (2) it replaces exclusive concern with women 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, 2006). Given women’s ongoing exclusion from the political sphere, focusing on ‘women’ remains crucial for mapping patterns of political access, behaviors, and effects. However, theories of gender offer a chance

to delve more deeply by exploring masculinities and femininities, as well as the relative status of men and women, in the conduct of political life.

A second objective among feminists is to broaden definitions of 'politics'. Political scientists tend to use this term to refer to formal political processes related to government and elections. However, women's movement activism has led scholars to theorize two additional meanings. On the one hand, feminists have expanded 'politics' to encompass informal politics and the dynamics of everyday life. For them, social movements are a form of participation on par with engagement inside the state (Beckwith, 2007). At the same time, they draw attention to the power relations that permeate all levels of social life, including relations within the private sphere, believing 'the personal is political' (Okin, 1979). On the other hand, feminists and postmodern theorists have also adopted a notion of 'politics' as any manifestation of power relations (Butler, 1990). This latter approach departs most from positivist assumptions, theorizing about not only the politics of the state and social movements, but also the politics of language.

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, with some suggesting that the perspectives of the marginalized should be drawn upon as a resource for generating more valid knowledge about the world (Hartsock, 1983). Regardless of 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 *et al.*, 2007) – feminist scholars agree that research should contribute to some type of positive transformation, whether empowerment of women as a group or the deconstruction of gendered categories in public policy.<sup>1</sup>

### *Rational choice approaches in political science*

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 (Green and Shapiro, 1994; Levi, 1997; Ferejohn, 2002). As these terms suggest, rational choice theorists aim to enact a shift in political analysis to produce parsimonious statements of social processes in order to generate testable hypotheses and falsifiable theories within explicit scope conditions (Levi, 1997; Lovett, 2006). The first step is to ascribe 'rationality' to all actors in a model. For critics, this is a central point of contention as political actors do not always behave in an instrumentally rational manner, but may succumb to weakness of will, be driven

<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to Laura Rosenbury for helping us nuance this point.

by habit or convention, or be fundamentally uncertain about the choices before them (Simon, 1957; Elster, 1984).

In practice, the rationality postulate is often<sup>2</sup> more of an analytical choice than a psychological claim: only insofar as it is assumed that players<sup>3</sup> can act intentionally based on their beliefs and desires, is it possible to generalize about empirical patterns in their behavior (Riker and Ordeshook, 1973; Ferejohn, 2002). As such, rational choice models contain no *a priori* prescription of goals or motivations (Levi, 1997; Ferejohn, 2002). To be considered 'rational', preference orderings are understood to be both complete and transitive: options are comparable in the mind of the individual and preference orderings fit together in a logically consistent way.<sup>4</sup> In its most simplified form, therefore, rationality is adopted as a way of connecting purposeful actors to their actions, establishing an analytic base from which it is possible to make claims and identify causal mechanisms (Lovett, 2006; Hindmoor, 2011).

Once the assumption of rationality is adopted and preferences, payoffs, and constraints are identified by the researcher, the goal is to link these behavioral motives to the institutions and actions that cause aggregate outcomes. This approach is most powerful under very structured circumstances, as variance in constraints often holds greater explanatory weight than differences in fundamental preferences, treated as fixed and exogenous to the model (Ferejohn and Satz, 1995; Hindmoor, 2011). Thus, assumptions are meant to simplify, rather than to explain, by elucidating how changes in structures or rules generate different outcomes (Lovett, 2006: 262). A variety of constraints – including rules, norms, and risk profiles – affect asymmetries in the information available to particular individuals (Levi, 1997; Weingast, 2002). These structures shape how individuals act strategically and how group decision-making occurs, transforming micro-level behaviors into macro-level outcomes.

Ideas about rationality and action within constraints inform two types of rational choice inquiry, which confer different priorities to the role of cooperative and non-cooperative strategic interaction. One branch is social choice theory, which stipulates theories of collective decision-making whereby individual preferences are aggregated into social outcomes (Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1973). These analyses specify a 'social choice function', or the aggregation mechanism through which individual preferences are translated into collective outputs (Olsen, 1965; Ferejohn, 2002). A second branch is game theory, which assumes that actors interact strategically with other rational agents to achieve

<sup>2</sup> One variant interprets behavior as both 'rational' and 'optimal,' assuming that actors do not only have reasons to act, but that they also hold the best of all possible beliefs. If problems arise in these models, this is not due to internal psychological confusion, but to situational ambiguity or information constraints (Eriksson, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> While individual actors are usually the subject of rational choice models, models and assumptions can also apply to groups.

<sup>4</sup> If the subject prefers A to B and B to C, then by transitivity, he or she must also prefer A to C.

their most preferred outcome. The ‘strategy’ in these models arises from the interdependency of social interaction, as payoffs are partially dependent on the actions of others.

### **Explaining the divide: feminism vs. rational choice theory**

Feminism and rational choice theory thus share a concern to rethink existing modes of political analysis. Despite similar ambitions, work applying 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, in the course of seeking to answer substantively and theoretically important questions that have been difficult to resolve within the confines of a single perspective. Thus, while the general lack of engagement seems to indicate that feminism and rational choice theory may be 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 (Krook and Squires, 2006; Murray, 2007; Driscoll and Krook, 2009), others make empirically engaged arguments against its utility for feminist analysis (Schwartz-Shea, 2002). Possible reasons for this lack of engagement can be seen in critiques of rational choice theory developed by feminist scholars in other disciplines. Despite different points of reference, they share the opinion that rational choice theory is often sexist, in that it tends to ‘deny to women ... 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). These orientations are often implicit and unconscious, echoing tendencies in Western thought to associate terms like ‘universal’ and ‘neutral’ with the needs, preferences, and priorities of men (Okin, 1979).

In economics, feminist critiques focus on three issues: features attributed to the rational agent, definitions of ‘economics’ that exclude or overlook non-market activities, and deference to normative views of gender relations that justify gender inequalities. Feminists are especially wary of the central character of economic analysis, described as a rational, autonomous, self-interested agent who makes choices within exogenously imposed constraints and trades with other agents in order to maximize a utility or profit function. Such models assume that individuals

are 'independent agents and unique selves ... able and responsible for taking care of their own needs' (Strassmann, 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). Feminists dispute the usefulness of this actor as the best starting point for economic analysis, arguing that neglect of the social and emotional dimensions of human behavior constitutes a serious limitation. They point out 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).

Feminist philosophers present slightly different objections. They note that since the time of the Greeks, but especially 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 understand the world, which, because it was fundamentally ordered and logical, could be accessed through a single and identical method. Descartes felt that this method was accessible to all, but Immanuel Kant (1991) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1987) declared women 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 were mapped onto the dualism of male/female (Lloyd, 1984; Bordo, 1987). 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).

In sociology, finally, feminist critiques articulate two sets of concerns. Paula England (1989) equates this approach with neoclassical economics and objects to rational choice on the grounds that it assumes a 'separative self' as opposed to an 'emotionally connected self'. Her critique draws on feminist work in psychology showing that men are socialized as autonomous actors, while women are socialized in terms of their connections with others (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982). By assuming a separative model of self, England maintains, rational choice models prohibit altruism or actions 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.<sup>5</sup> 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' (1989: 17).

On the basis of these discussions, it is clear that feminists in many disciplines are hesitant to engage with rational choice theory on the grounds that it uses concepts informed by patriarchal assumptions. Nevertheless, as Raia Prokhovnik (2002)

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed rebuttal of these points, see Friedman and Diem (1993).

argues, terms like ‘rational’ and ‘woman’ need not form a hierarchical and polarized opposition. Some scholars have drawn on rational choice frameworks, indeed, as a means for unraveling what appear to be puzzling patterns of feminist concern, despite not explicitly attempting a reconciliation of approaches. For example, Kristin Luker (1975) examines the sexual and contraceptive choices of women seeking abortion services in the early 1970s. She asks why a majority of women in her sample were voluntarily sexually active, did not want to be pregnant, and had knowledge about preventing pregnancy, but were not using effective contraception. Attempting to overcome perceptions that they were irrational, Luker theorizes the choices of these women as assigning a high cost to contraceptive use, some benefits to becoming pregnant, and a low probability of pregnancy from their sexual activities. Understanding how norms of gender affect subjects’ cost–benefit analyses offers a means for feminists and others to pursue policy change to reduce the rate of contraceptive risk-taking. At the same time, the analysis informs rational choice theorizing by elaborating the source and content of micro-level behaviors sustaining broader dynamics of gender inequality.<sup>6</sup>

### *Rational choice views of feminism*

Feminism, in turn, has found few advocates among rational choice political scientists. This reception has mainly involved silence, rather than outright opposition. To the degree that ‘gender’ is mentioned, it is treated as synonymous with the study of ‘identity’ (Akerlof and Kranton, 2000; Calvert, 2002). One plausible explanation is that issues of identification and expression are often viewed as irreconcilable with rational choice accounts of human behavior. As Randall Calvert (2002) notes, seminal works in rational choice theory reframe these dynamics in terms of choice phenomena: Anthony Downs (1957) treats partisanship and ideology as ‘rules of thumb’ rather than 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. These early studies suggest that there is no analytical space in rational choice theory for introducing the concept of gender, much less new definitions of politics or a commitment to political change.

Nevertheless, a significant body of contemporary rational choice research has addressed identity-oriented topics. One segment treats identity and expressive motivations as features of individual preferences. This includes work recognizing that voting is not purely instrumental, but that individuals may also vote to express solidarity with a group, affirm allegiance to a party, enjoy performing a civil duty, or establish their own political identity (Schuessler, 2000). A second

<sup>6</sup> In economics, an analogous effort is made by Peter (2003), who argues that social choice theory can improve the study of gender inequalities by focusing on the informational basis of agency, but overlooks the importance of ‘situated’ agency in its focus on the aggregation of individual preferences.



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 is Daniel Posner's (2004) study of the patterns of politicization of tribal cleavages in post-colonial African states. Analyzing inter-tribal relations, Posner finds that in Malawi tribal distinctions form the basis of overt political antagonism, while in Zambia the same two tribes are political allies and frequently inter-marry. His explanation focuses on the role of electoral institutions, which in Malawi make tribal identity an attractive basis for partisan organization, but in Zambia cause tribal cleavages to be a less salient dimension of political organization and conflict.

Recent work, consequently, seeks to generate models combining instrumental political incentives and strategic action with some recognition of the independent value and realities of cultural identification. As such, Calvert suggests, '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' (2002: 570). All the same, he concedes that many rational choice theories present an inherently 'under-socialized' model of human behavior. These frameworks thus require 'supplementation in order to give a full accounting of identity and expressive phenomena, as well as other features of social life' (2002: 593).

Although rarely applied to questions of gender, studies in a range of disciplines illustrate how feminist concepts might improve rational choice research agendas, as well as how the tools of rational choice might be applied to feminist ends. Some of these works explicitly theorize sex- and gender-based differences in preferences or payoff functions, assuming that women have different priorities, opportunities, and choice sets than men (Carling, 1991; Doepke and Tertilt, 2009). The range of these projects is wide, covering topics like gender inequality in marriage (Cherry, 2003); gender in the politics of micro-finance and development (Sen, 1992; Rankin, 2002); and solutions to harmful practices like foot-binding and female genital mutilation (Mackie, 1996). Consistent with feminism, these analyses offer insight into the power dynamics perpetuating patterns of gender inequality, which can in turn be used to generate prescriptions for change.

An example in political science is the work of Anna Harvey (1998), who uses a rational choice framework to explain surges in the passage of policies related to women's rights in the United States, although her intent is not necessarily to combine this with a feminist perspective. These patterns, she argues, stem from the legacy of women's delayed suffrage, which has meant that women, as late-comers to politics, have not been able to transform their voting rights into the passage of policies beneficial to women. Instead, Harvey demonstrates that parties prioritized such issues at moments when elites believed that women constituted an electoral bloc and were being threatened with electoral retaliation by women's organizations. These conditions were met only in the 1920s, following the suffrage movement, and in the 1970s, with the emergence of second wave feminism. Harvey's study uses the tools of rational choice theory, namely a focus on structures

and behavior, to connect micro-level interactions to macro-level processes. However, her work also reflects feminist concerns to recognize the role of gender in shaping the terms of women's engagement in formal politics, calling attention to the broad political-structural reasons behind the exclusion of women's issues from the realm of political debate.

### **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 central questions in political science, along the lines of other recent efforts to combine feminist (Krook and Mackay, 2011) and rational choice (Katznelson and Weingast, 2005) perspectives with other literatures. Building the case for synthesis, scholars sympathetic to both schools argue that feminist knowledge about the norms and practices of gender can be used to better theorize the preferences, choices, and calculations of all individuals, and, as a result, to devise policies and services more closely attuned to women's needs (Seiz, 1995; Anderson, 2001; Cudd, 2001). Others note that rational choice concepts like bounded rationality, institutional constraints, and opportunity costs may offer crucial leverage for uncovering, and potentially disrupting, dynamics sustaining women's marginalization (Friedman and Diem, 1993). For scholars open to the possibility of engagement, these respective strengths afford new sources of analytical traction for those working primarily within the other literature. More specifically, feminism offers a means for identifying influences on political behavior, while rational choice theory helps uncover the mechanisms underpinning political action, thereby facilitating opportunities for social transformation.<sup>7</sup> Synthesizing these perspectives suggests that a feminist-rational choice research design would involve attending to five elements: gender, strategy, institutions, power, and change.

### *Gender*

According to one well-known definition, gender is 'a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes', and 'a primary way of signifying relationships of power' (Scott, 1988: 42). The result is that '[g]ender norms support a status quo in which one party is placed in a position of advantage and power in relation to the other party and this situation is itself presented as the "natural order of things"' (Gatens, 1998: 5). Gender is therefore a key distinction in the organization of politics and society. Yet, feminists also disagree as to what it is: some view it as something that people 'have', while others frame it as something that people 'do' (Connell, 1987). Still others describe it as an institution to capture the enduring nature, and social origins, of gendered

<sup>7</sup> This statement is not intended to imply that feminist scholars do not engage in causal analysis, but simply that attention to causal mechanisms *per se* is a central feature of rational choice.

practices and ideas (Martin, 2004). Concepts of gender in feminist analysis thus intersect in many ways with institutions and power, but are not entirely reducible to either phenomenon. To be considered feminist, research must attend to questions of gender, in other words, but may do this in a variety of ways, incorporating it as a factor that explains or must be explained in relation to a particular phenomenon.

By way of contrast, most rational choice models operate on the basis of a generic actor, a stipulation that conceals rather than clarifies how norms of gender might shape preferences, decisions, and actions. Yet, precisely because gender stands as a fundamental and immensely powerful coordinating force in human interaction, it can provide rational choice theorists with important leverage in their attempts to understand the origin and nature of values that motivate human behavior. In other words, the concept of gender can provide a theoretical and empirical basis on which rational choice theories can better describe how and why people behave as they do, addressing questions regarding the nature, origins, and formation of preferences.<sup>8</sup> In line with feminist usage, incorporating gender into the analysis does not implicate biological sex as the key explanatory factor in human interaction. Rather, focusing on the social meanings given to biological differences opens up opportunities to explore how gender norms affect the respective preferences, risk evaluations, and strategic calculations of women and men – or, alternatively, to recognize inequalities in outcomes that might otherwise be obscured.

### *Strategy*

Strategic interaction is identified by many rational choice scholars as one of the core features of rational choice theory (Knight, 1992; Levi, 1997). Critics of the rationalist paradigm have interpreted this postulate pejoratively, arguing that it suggests that actors are selfish, cold, and calculating (England, 1989). For many rational choice researchers, however, being strategic involves considering what others will do before making choices, taking into account the beliefs and expected behaviors of others and modifying one's own actions accordingly. This emphasis on purposeful action by socially embedded individuals directs attention towards discrete causal mechanisms and away from broader structural determinants of political behavior. Strategy, as guided by the rationality postulate, thus assumes a crucial role in translating micro-level actions into macro-level outcomes, calling attention to how individual preferences and decisions are embedded – albeit in an abstract and largely ahistorical manner – in social interactions. While formal modeling techniques are often used to illuminate these dynamics, insights about strategic interactions can also be incorporated in a relatively straightforward manner to structure more descriptive analytical accounts (Bates *et al.*, 1998a).

Feminist scholars do not typically use the language of strategy, but have long recognized that actors are socially embedded, such that their actions are often

<sup>8</sup> We are indebted to Linda Nicholson for providing us with this insight.

interdependent (Chodorow, 1978). A feminist approach to strategic interaction might therefore inform rational choice frameworks by theorizing ways in which strategies are contextually gendered, or alternatively, pointing to ways in which distinct strategies are attractive or unavailable to particular sub-groups within a given population. In turn, the opportunity to think more explicitly – in line with rational choice frameworks – about how individuals' choices are shaped by beliefs about the behavior of others may push feminist scholars to make their intuitions explicit in relation to a host of topics that are rarely viewed through a strategic lens, including social movement mobilization and the dynamics of political representation, thereby expanding on the analytical leverage provided by existing accounts.

### *Institutions*

Institutions are often understood as the formal features of political systems, but may also include informal procedures, norms, and cognitive scripts that structure political life as if they were formal rules (March and Olsen, 1989; North, 1990). Many feminists recognize the importance of political institutions (Acker, 1990). Most focus on the gendered nature of formal institutions, but some discuss gendered practices and norms in ways that are consistent with definitions of informal institutions (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly, 1995; Kenny, 2007). Their work suggests that while institutions are gendered in ways that structure social and political interactions, new versions may be introduced that reform or reinforce gender disparities (Lovenduski, 1998). A feminist perspective, consequently, not only enables analysts to 'see' more institutions, but also helps to 'denaturalize' the social arrangements that sustain patterns of inequality (Krook and Mackay, 2011).

Whereas rational choice models tend to 'work' best in highly contextualized applications with finite scope, rational choice theorists also give a central role to institutions in their attempts to explain various political phenomena. The majority treat institutions as exogenous to the model of political behavior, the goal being to theorize how formal and informal 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 on the part of feminists and rational choice theorists points to an important theoretical overlap, as well as the potential for mutual exchange. In particular, recent work on feminist institutionalism points to new opportunities for theorizing constraints, which can in turn lead to better articulated and substantiated empirical work (Krook and Mackay, 2011).

### *Power*

Feminists are keenly aware of relations of power and how pervasive they are in shaping the dynamics of political life, including boundaries drawn around what is considered '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 (Kenny, 2007). An exercise of power for feminists entails instances of obvious coercion, as well as more subtle dynamics of exclusion. In contrast, power is 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 (Knight, 1992). However, as Terry Moe (2005) notes, the political processes that generate institutions create structures that are beneficial for some but not for others, depending on which group has the strength and authority to impose its will. These observations are echoed by Suzanne Dovi (2007), who views democratic institutions as oppressive to women given the significant underrepresentation of women in elected politics. Bringing in a focus on power is thus vital to a feminist–rational choice approach, which can inform both literatures by modeling how power operates in different contexts to shape political outcomes.

### *Change*

One of the central goals of feminist research is to promote change. Feminist work is full of examples of ways in which norms and practices of gender can be disrupted – deliberately, but sometimes also with unintended consequences – through strategic engagements with political institutions (Chappell, 2006). By way of comparison, studies that use rational choice theory tend to focus more on stability, viewing moments of change in terms of a transition between equilibrium orders, commonly due to scope conditions imposed such that key assumptions are analytically tractable (Bates *et al.*, 1998b). However, these two concerns can come together in a feminist–rational choice approach. Once institutions are created, they are reinforced through power relations that privilege certain groups at the expense of others. Yet, the act of uncovering this dynamic opens up the possibility of an alternative. Moreover, the rational choice emphasis on those mechanisms by which institutions are self-enforcing may be instructive for activists in ‘highlight[ing] how and why our institutions are so resistant to reshaping’ (Gatens, 1998: 2). A feminist–rational choice framework thus not only offers a revised approach to political research, but also brings with it the potential for broader political transformation.

### **Applying the framework: gender quota adoption in Argentina**

A second look at a topic that has been the focus of both feminist and rational choice research demonstrates what might be gained from a synthesis of approaches. In recent years, more than 100 countries have witnessed the adoption of quotas to increase the number of female candidates to parliament (Krook, 2009). By mandating women’s inclusion on party lists, these developments challenge gender norms associating men with the public sphere and women with the private. They also threaten to interrupt gendered patterns of election, as women constitute

only 19% of parliamentarians worldwide (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2011). Yet, most measures have been passed by male-dominated legislatures and political parties. Although extensive, this literature rarely addresses why male elites approve policies that reconfigure gender relations and reduce their opportunities to be reelected. In light of feminist and rational choice contributions, reexamining one case in greater detail illustrates the analytical payoffs in attending to dynamics of gender, strategy, institutions, power, and change.

### *Feminist perspectives*

Feminist studies frame quotas as measures for women, and in this sense retain a focus on sex. Nevertheless, they also take up issues of gender in various ways. Many scholars argue, for example, that quotas are necessary to counteract biases in candidate selection, which tend to associate masculine characteristics with ‘qualifications’ to hold office (Franceschet and Piscopo, 2009). Quotas politicize these criteria by labeling women’s exclusion unjust. Research also highlights gender disparities in the conditions of women’s access, noting that, as the majority of elites, men have the power to pass and put these provisions into practice (Schmidt and Saunders, 2004). Whereas female elites view quotas as necessary for ensuring equality, male elites tend to attribute women’s low numbers to choices made by individual women, rather than to structural patterns of discrimination (Meier, 2008).

Feminist work emphasizes broad influences on the origins of quota reform, such as the mobilization of women (Bruhn, 2003); the strategies of party elites (Davidson-Schmich, 2006); and the efforts of international organizations and activist networks (Krook, 2006). Generally, this research focuses on actors who bring new ideas and pressure to bear on policymaking processes, rather than those directly responsible for quota adoption: legislators and party conferences. In all likelihood, this is linked to interest in expanding definitions of ‘politics’ to include interactions beyond the formal political arena. It may also be related to feminist goals to promote change, seeking to understand where it originates. Yet, the fact that quotas have highly varied effects also raises questions about motivations in terms of whether or not quotas are intended to actually alter candidate selection processes (Krook, 2009).

Few rational choice theorists have engaged with this literature, but core features of this approach can be used to develop a critique. Perhaps the most obvious point is that feminist studies identify determinants, but do not explore the causal mechanisms by which quotas are adopted or implemented (Kanthak and Krause, 2010). As a result, relatively little is known about how incentives have combined with institutions to translate more concretely into outcomes. Rational choice scholars might advocate focusing more narrowly on one part of the adoption process to theorize the choices faced by individual actors in policymaking (cf. Fréchette *et al.*, 2008), considering how institutional or other ideational factors shape the calculus to support quota reform. The tools of rational choice may therefore provide new leverage

by parsing out discrete pieces of the decision-making process and illuminating the causal mechanisms that are often implicitly referenced in other accounts of quota adoption. Yet, the more limited scope of such models may raise concerns among some feminists that ignoring the larger context may lead to a misspecification of preferences and overlook means for influencing them.

### *Rational choice perspectives*

A recent analysis develops a game-theoretic account of the incentives behind quota reform in France, suggesting – counterintuitively – that quota adoption is in male legislators’ self-interests (Fréchette *et al.*, 2008). The model’s starting point is the majoritarian electoral system for the National Assembly, leading deputies to anticipate an incumbency advantage against challengers. The authors propose that this advantage is enhanced for male deputies by voter preferences for male over female candidates. The result is that male incumbents stand an even greater chance of being re-elected when facing a female challenger, a situation more likely to occur if parties were required to nominate increased numbers of women. However, to ensure that male incumbents would not be de-selected, deputies introduced a lenient financial penalty for non-implementation, thereby creating a loophole whereby parties could violate the law in order to nominate men. Fréchette *et al.* argue that these dynamics explain why the proportion of women rose only marginally from 10.9% in 1997 to 12.3% in 2002, despite the requirement to select equal numbers of women and men.

This model presents a parsimonious account of quota adoption, suggesting that this decision was logical in light of electoral institutions and male advantage, further securing men’s dominant status in electoral politics. This explanation’s strength is its ability to link individual incentives to unanticipated collective outcomes under specific institutional constraints. It is also consistent with feminist concerns to illuminate the relationships of power that maintain male privilege. Yet, feminist researchers may take issue with it for several reasons. Some may deem its conjectures sexist and androcentric. For the sake of simplicity, Fréchette *et al.* assume that ‘all incumbents are men’ (2008: 901). This not only equates men with the generic political actor, but also denies women the possibility of being independent rational agents. Consequently, the model overlooks the female legislators who played a key role in arguing for and against the bill (Mossuz-Lavau, 1998; Krook, 2009). The authors further undercut women’s agency by explicitly ignoring ‘the surely essential role of feminist movements’ (Fréchette *et al.*, 2008: 893). For rational choice advocates, this simplifying assumption may be defensible, a necessary simplification to narrow the scope of the empirical analysis. However, for some feminists, failing to incorporate women’s activism and agency necessarily renders the account incomplete.

A more problematic feature is the assumption that voters have sexist preferences, which makes legislator behavior logically consistent and, by implication, justifies

ongoing inequalities in the political sphere. Although this assumption ought to serve as a mere simplification (Lovett, 2006), the authors' causal explanation hangs on its veracity, without which their model cannot be mathematically solved. Moreover, subsequent scholarship has shown that when more accurate measures of swing and experience are introduced, this assumption is empirically unsubstantiated (Murray, 2008).<sup>9</sup> Although these critiques are specific to the model and not rational choice theory *per se*, misdiagnosing the problem has important normative implications, misdirecting efforts for combating inequality. These weaknesses reveal that feminist perspectives, sensitive to contextual features, are essential for devising accurate empirical accounts of gender quota reform.

### *A feminist–rational choice account*

Feminist and rational choice approaches are therefore limited in their ability to explain quota adoption. Synthesizing elements of both, however, confers substantial analytical leverage, which can be illustrated by way of a case study of Argentina. For mutual comprehension, a more descriptive narrative will be presented in place of a formal model to illustrate how research along these lines might be designed, even without training in formal modeling. The analysis begins with three assumptions inspired by rational choice theory: (1) legislators share a concern for professional advancement, (2) professional advancement depends upon the institutional context of electoral and candidate selection rules, and (3) parties' primary interests are in maximizing their electoral share, an objective that party leaders faithfully pursue. These suggest that an account of quota adoption should center on the incentives and constraints faced by legislators and parties. A feminist lens, however, requires modifying this approach to incorporate gender, expand the range of relevant actors, and explore the impetus for – and limits to – policy change.

In 1991, Argentina became the first country to introduce a quota law. At the time the law was proposed, women constituted only 9% of the Senate and 6% of the Chamber of Deputies (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1995: 58). In 1989, a female senator from the Civic Radical Union submitted a bill calling for a revision of the Electoral Code to establish a minimum of 30% women on candidate lists. Days later, female deputies from several parties presented a similar proposal. These bills were the result of mobilization among women in civil society and were initially promoted almost exclusively by women, who lobbied their male colleagues (Lubertino Beltrán, 1992). Not taking this campaign seriously, none of the parties developed a common position for or against quotas (Chama, 2001). Yet, as the vast majority of senators and deputies were male, these measures presented a threat to their political survival. Gender thus played a major role in structuring which actors expressed a commitment to these bills, as well as who had the power to adopt them – the majority of whom were openly hostile (Durrieu, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed critique of this article, see Murray *et al.*, (forthcoming).



Despite these odds, both bills passed with only a handful of opposing votes, much to the surprise of many advocates. This transformation was due to the *strategic calculations* of both legislators and party leaders, operating within the constraints of *political institutions*. The Senate bill was approved in 1990, largely because most senators believed that the bill would be rejected – or expire before it could be addressed – in the Chamber of Deputies (Durrieu, 1999). Further, indirect elections to the Senate guarded senators from the consequences of its implementation. Institutions also played a crucial role in the Chamber, which took up the bill at the end of 1991. Elections to this body are determined using a closed-list system, meaning that nomination to and the ordering of electoral lists is a primary determinant of who is elected. Control over access and ranking of the ballot means that legislators are beholden to party bosses who determine not only their possibility of reelection, but also their subsequent professional and political advancement (Jones, 2002).

An immediate consequence of these arrangements is that party discipline is quite high. Voting against party lines can be punished by withholding ballot access, as well as by expulsion, resulting in an effective end to a political career (Jones, 2002). Moreover, if the president heads the largest party, his or her policy agenda is virtually unstoppable (Mustapic, 2002). Aware of the need for his support, a small group of women approached President Carlos Saúl Menem of the Justicialist Party (Peronists). He encouraged women to continue mobilizing before evaluating whether or not he should intervene (Bonder and Nari, 1995). On the day of the vote, women filled the parliamentary galleries and hallways from 4 pm until the early hours of the morning (Chama, 2001). Although this was enough to inspire some new support, many observers still anticipated a negative vote or that the bill would be killed by a lack of quorum if the Peronist legislators – largely male – refused to vote (Diputados, 1991: 4134–4135).

The fate of the bill remained unclear until 2 am, when Menem sent the minister of the interior to address the deputies and instruct Peronist deputies to vote in favor. This shift on Menem's part was an unusual step, as in the past – and on future occasions – he sided decisively with conservative groups on women's issues. While the minister's speech emphasized the Peronists' historical commitment to women, most view this move as a strategic attempt to close a gender gap in support for the party by catering to the women's demands (Jones, 1996). Pressure from women – and particularly their mobilization on day of the vote – was therefore seen as a crucial opportunity for the president to improve his party's electoral share. His power over the party, in turn, was enough to garner the support of all of the Peronist deputies, whose presence was necessary for a quorum. To ensure their assent, party leaders also called for a nominal roll call vote, used to enforce party discipline in the face of internal party dissension (Jones, 2002).

Institutional arrangements governing candidate selection thus effectively forced male legislators to prioritize their party's political fate ahead of their own. Nevertheless, few observers anticipated that the law would in fact have any effect, with deputies explicitly acknowledging ambiguities in the text and one even

describing its passage as *gatopardismo*, a term referring to legal reforms that are in fact meant to change nothing (Diputados, 1991: 4182). Some objections in the debate noted that those who composed party lists faced virtually no penalty for putting women in the bottom third of their lists (Diputados, 1991: 4103). Indeed, in the first election after the quota passed, every party violated the law (Durrieu, 1999). Gender norms, and the relations of power that they involve, thus continued to shape the outcomes of the legal reform with disparate opportunities for men and women to run for office and challenge noncompliance with the law.

Quota adoption in Argentina, nevertheless, cannot be fully understood without acute appreciation for the institutions structuring actors' preferences and political strategies. The hostility of male deputies was overcome via the mechanism of party discipline, as well as the expectation that the law would have little impact. Even so, its passage – and later effectiveness – was made possible by sustained efforts by women to mobilize for change. Proposals originated with them, and their presence was crucial in convincing the president and party leaders to adopt the quota by presenting women as a credible voting bloc worthy of legislative attention. Further, a prolonged legal campaign by women's groups ensured legal clarification of the law, resulting in increasingly tighter enforcement (Krook, 2009). The law was eventually extended to the Senate when direct elections were instituted in 2001, leading to an increase in the proportion of female senators to 35% and female deputies to 39% by 2009. Without a combination of feminist and rational choice insights, therefore, it would not be possible to accurately capture the dynamics of quota reform and the underlying mechanisms behind political change.

### **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. Yet, apart from a few exceptions, work utilizing these perspectives rarely overlaps. To get to the heart of this divide in the discipline, this article reviews the main features of feminism and rational choice theory, as well as possible reasons for skepticism across these two approaches. It argues that, despite this silence, several studies illustrate the benefits of rapprochement, despite not explicitly proposing a synthesis, shedding new light on a variety of topics like decision-making, bargaining, development, and political representation. This article suggests that not only are there potential points of intersection, but also that each perspective brings with it important tools that may be used in fruitful ways to inform the other. To overcome current gaps and silences, the article proposes a combined research design attending to questions of gender, strategy, institutions, power, and change. Although this framework may not be suitable for tackling all questions in political science, and may not appeal to all scholars due to enduring differences in epistemology, it does offer a new way forward in terms of exploring the gendered dimensions of various political phenomena with an eye to overcoming gender inequality.

The contours and benefits of this synthesis are illustrated with reference to the adoption of gender quotas, shedding light on differences and potentially ongoing ‘fault lines’ between these approaches, including the scope and parsimony of proposed explanations. After discussing the weaknesses of both feminist and rational choice contributions, an analysis of Argentina reveals the productive ways in which elements of feminist and rational choice theory may be brought together to unravel the puzzle of quota adoption. This account offers an advance over feminist explanations by highlighting the micro-level interactions leading up to the decision to adopt these measures and the ways in which political institutions – both formal and informal – shape the strategies and constraints of different actors. The study presents an improvement over rational choice accounts by exploring how the gender of actors structures their preferences; how dynamics of power come into play in legislative decision-making, forcing actors to undermine what appear to be their own self-interests; and how sustained mobilization by women’s groups may inform both quota adoption and implementation, even if legislative decisions are taken with the intent to have little effect. This example suggests that a combined research design may open up avenues for future investigation, as well as uncover new strategies for political change.

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