



Gender Quotas in British Politics: Multiple Approaches and Methods in Feminist Research

Mona Lena Krook^a and Judith Squires^b

^aDepartment of Political Science Washington University, Campus Box 1063, One Brookings Drive, St. Louis, MO 63130-4899, USA.

E-mail: mlkrook@wustl.edu

^bDepartment of Politics, University of Bristol, 10 Priory Road, Bristol BS8 1TU, UK.

E-mail: judith.squires@bristol.ac.uk

Recent methods textbooks contain chapters or sections on feminism as an approach to political research. Feminist scholars themselves, however, often express great ambivalence towards the possibility of presenting one single feminist perspective within political science. In fact, many treat methodologies as ‘justificatory strategies’ and simply employ those most suited to addressing the particular issue at hand. In this sense, we argue, there is no distinctive feminist methodology, but there is a distinctive feminist approach *to* methodology and methods. More specifically, feminist research is driven by substantive political problems and is thus open to the deployment of a broad range of methodological frames. To establish this claim, we survey the recent research produced by feminist political scientists on gender quotas in British politics, paying close attention to the specific approaches and methods applied by individual scholars. We discover a distinctive willingness on the part of feminists to employ various theoretical frames and to explore possibilities for synthesizing or juxtaposing methods in innovative ways. Rather than perceiving this to be a weakness, undermining any notion of an overarching ‘feminist’ perspective, we suggest that this methodological eclecticism is a strength, signalling the ability of feminist researchers to produce multifaceted research findings. Indeed, recent feminist work on British politics should be taken as a model of good practice in political research.

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Introduction

The emergent preoccupation with research methods in British social sciences has spawned a plethora of new textbooks, many of which contain chapters or sections on feminism (Marsh and Stoker, 2002; Burnham *et al.*, 2004).¹ Although feminism is treated as an approach, as ‘a set of attitudes, understandings and practices that define a certain way of doing political



science' (Marsh and Stoker, 2002, 1), feminist researchers themselves express great ambivalence towards the possibility of presenting 'a simple and single feminist perspective within political science' (Randall, 2002, 109). Indeed, many feminists explicitly recognize methodologies as 'justificatory strategies' and make a pragmatic appeal to whichever promises the greatest political benefits (Harding, 1987, 196; see also Lloyd, 1984; Frazer and Lacey, 1993; Sylvester, 1994). In this sense, we contend, there is no distinctive feminist methodology, but there is a distinctive feminist approach *to* methodology and methods. More specifically, feminist research is driven by substantive political problems and is thus open to the deployment of a broad range of methodological frames. We view this methodological eclecticism to be a strength, signalling a productive and 'problem centric' approach to political research that might be more widely adopted across the discipline. To establish this claim, we survey the recent research produced by feminist political scientists on gender quotas in British politics, paying close attention to the specific approaches and methods applied by individual scholars. We discover a distinctive willingness on the part of feminists to employ various theoretical frames and to explore possibilities for synthesizing or juxtaposing methods in innovative ways. Pointing out the benefits of this eclectic and open-minded perspective on methodological questions, we argue that problem-driven research should be cultivated at the expense of method-driven work. In this regard, we suggest, recent feminist work on British politics should be taken as a model of good practice in political research.

Multiple Approaches and Methods in Feminist Research

Scholars familiar with feminist debates of recent decades will know that there is no single feminism, no one feminist theory (Bryson, 1992; Phillips, 1998; Arneil, 1999; Hill Collins, 2000). As various feminist theoretical frames entail distinctive epistemological and ontological claims (Squires, 1999), which inform methodological choices (Hay, 2002), feminists by definition cannot embrace a single methodology. The inclusion of feminism as an 'approach' in research methods texts thus promotes a false unity, encouraging readers to expect a distinctive feminist methodology or 'tool kit', only to be frustrated by feminists' refusal to articulate a single set of shared methodological practices. Seeking to address these issues, numerous feminist methods guides argue that feminism *per se* is a perspective, not a method (Reinharz, 1992, 241), because there is no single ontological or epistemological position, nor research technique, that is distinctly feminist (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002, 15). However, these authors also point out that 'feminism is not open to everything' (Reinharz, 1992), as it typically implies a critical approach to the conventions of academic disciplines and is often informed by a certain degree of political



engagement, which extends to questions of methodology (Ferguson, 1993, 22). Indeed, because feminist research generally aims to create social change, it is frequently trans-disciplinary, reflexive, and informed by theories of power (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002, 18). As a result, feminists frequently ask different questions from those that are traditionally raised in political research and often utilize ethnographic, narrative, and cross-cultural methods that are rarely taught to mainstream students of political science (Tickner, 2005). Thus, while there is no distinctive feminist methodology, there may be a distinctive feminist approach to questions of methodology and methods.

This approach manifests itself in a number of different ways, and for various reasons, leads to greater internal diversity within feminist work in politics than feminist research in international relations. More specifically, feminist work in international relations (IR) emerged at the same time as the ‘third debate,’ which began in the 1980s and signalled the development of a new ‘post-positivist’ era within certain strands of IR, meaning that feminist IR theory has always embraced a critical transformative project (Squires, 2002, 208–226). Thus, although IR feminists have used a variety of methods, because they have been able to draw from the methodologies deployed by feminists in other disciplines, most ‘fall into methodological frameworks that have variously been described as post-positivist, reflectivist, or interpretivist’ (Tickner, 2005, 2). Feminist politics scholars, by contrast, are generally more open to using more orthodox positivist methods in their research at the same time that they maintain an understanding of — and willingness to apply — more interpretive methods. For example, some feminists draw on traditional tools, but remain sensitive to the significance of contextual discursive constructions of gendered identities (Mazur, 2004), while others advocate the use of discourse analysis, but emphasize the importance of interrogating the institutions of the state (Mottier, 2004). This facilitates greater interaction between positivist and post-positivist feminist scholars, and between empirical political scientists and normative political theorists, than is common in the discipline more generally. This process of exchange, in turn, allows feminist researchers to deploy methodologies in ways that lead to new insights in the study of politics more generally. Most notably, ‘while rationalists underline “institutionally embedded” action and interaction logics, and social constructivists entertain ideas about cognitive mechanisms such as “elite learning”, gender analyses seek to bridge the gap between institutions, discourse, and agency’ (Liebert, 2003, 38). In this way, feminist research challenges traditional methodological divides between various schools within political science by illustrating how methodological pluralism works in practice (Siim, 2004). By engaging in problem-driven rather than method-driven work, feminist political research thus represents a new way forward in answering enduring questions in the field by offering new perspectives on good practice in political research.



To illustrate these points, we review feminist research on British politics to map the range of approaches and methods employed by scholars to address a shared set of political concerns. Although feminists were initially sceptical of studying women's participation in conventional types of politics, most of their work today centres on questions of political representation, because the political under-representation of women globally has increasingly come to be seen as a problem for democracy, as Britain has witnessed a significant rise in the numbers of women in Westminster, and as devolution has created new political opportunities — and high levels of representation — for women in Scotland and Wales (Mackay, 2004; see also Krook, 2005b). Hence, while feminist research in the 1970s and 1980s focused on extending the boundaries of the 'political' by exploring heterogeneous political processes rather than formal political institutions (Squires, 2002), more recent work has turned its gaze back to the state (Mazur, 2002, 2004; Randall, 2002; Kantola, 2004). This shift, we suggest, is symptomatic of women's increased participation in formal politics within Britain, reflecting developments in the polity, and their growing confidence within the profession, reflecting developments within the discipline. Although rarely noted, this change in focus has also had a range of theoretical and methodological ramifications. Since most second-wave feminists were interested in how to organize for political change in the context of patriarchal political institutions, they focused their energy on feminist social movements outside the state. Feminist research in the 1970s and 1980s, therefore, employed more interpretive methods appropriate to analysing social movement participation and tended to eschew more orthodox types of political institutionalism. However, as women gained increased levels of political representation and gender machinery began to be developed within state bureaucracies in the 1990s, feminists developed greater interest in the relationship between institutional politics and broader social movement activism. This led to a heightened awareness of the potential benefits of investigating — and possibly adopting — the methodological tools of more traditional political science. Nonetheless, the long tradition of sensitivity to informal political practices and marginalized political discourses contributed to a distinctive determination among feminists to interrogate interpretive and institutional methodologies within political research. With the changed empirical focus of feminist research in British politics, therefore, came the exploration of new approaches and methods in the study of gender.

Gender Quotas in British Politics

Since the focus on political representation constitutes 'the most identifiable area of concentrated work by feminist political scientists in British politics' (Mackay, 2004, 99-100; cf. Lovenduski, 2005; Stokes, 2005), we begin by



synthesizing this research to outline major developments in women's political representation in Britain. We organize this discussion around the key debates and events pertaining to electoral gender quotas — all-women shortlists, twinning, and zipping — applied in elections to Westminster, the Scottish Parliament, and the National Assembly for Wales.² Although gender quotas remain controversial worldwide, more than 90 countries have witnessed the adoption of some form of quota policy, most within the last 10 years. The first quota regulations in British politics were approved in the early 1980s, when the Social Democratic Party and later the Liberal Democrats required that at least one woman be included on every candidate shortlist. The Labour Party followed these efforts in 1987, when the party conference decided that in districts where a woman had been nominated, at least one woman had to be included on the shortlist for constituency selection. This policy was supported by the trade unions, but not by the National Executive Committee (NEC), who were nonetheless called upon 2 years later by the party conference to make proposals for instituting quotas for various positions inside the party. Labour women continued to press for further change, however, and drew on lessons gained from other social democratic parties in Western Europe to formulate their own proposals for all-women shortlists to increase the number of women in elected positions. Although their ideas were initially rejected, the idea behind the policy was approved by the party conference in 1990, when it agreed to a target of 50% women among the party's representatives within 10 years or three general elections. Following Labour's fourth consecutive electoral defeat in 1992, however, the party revisited the issue and approved a policy of all-women shortlists in 50% of all vacant and winnable seats.

Once adopted, the policy was received with scepticism and hostility, both within certain sections of the party — where some campaigned to get the policy reversed — and within other parties and in the press. Aware of these objections, as well as the need to be sensitive to the autonomy of local parties in the process of candidate selection, the NEC asked the party officers from the relevant constituencies in each region to organize 'consensus meetings' to decide which seats would be subject to all-women shortlists. As a result, most of these meetings complied voluntarily with the provision, although resistance was often strong in places where the previous candidate was a man, who could no longer be shortlisted under the new rules. Nonetheless, 35 women had been selected by January 1996, when the party was forced to halt the policy on the grounds that it was illegal, after it lost a court challenge brought by two male members of the party who had sought nomination in districts designated for all-women shortlists. The two men argued that their exclusion from the process of candidate selection violated the terms of the Sex Discrimination Act, which prohibited sex discrimination when judging qualifications for employment.



Although the decision was made on questionable legal grounds, the NEC chose not to appeal the decision, at least in part because an appeal would have forced re-selections in all the districts governed by all-women shortlists, rather than just the two constituencies affected by this particular court case. This tactical choice, however, created considerable uncertainty regarding the legal status of quotas. This strengthened the position of those in all the parties who opposed any form of positive action in candidate selection, but also cast doubt on the possibilities of applying quotas in elections to the newly formed Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales. The proportion of women in the House of Commons, nonetheless, increased dramatically in 1997, from 9.2 to 18.2%, due almost exclusively to changes in patterns of candidate selection inside the Labour Party (see Table 1).

Following the Labour landslide, one of the first items on the new government's agenda was devolution. Although several female MPs sought to introduce provisions for positive action in the devolution bills, both the government and individual MPs expressed concerns that amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act might put the UK in violation of certain international treaties, including the European Union Equal Treatment Directive and the European Convention on Human Rights. The devolution campaigns in both

Table 1 Number of women MPs from the three main parties elected at the last five general elections

	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005
Labour	209	229	271	418	412	355
Women	10	21	37	101	95	98
% of total	4.8	9.2	13.7	24.2	23.1	27.6
Conservative	397	376	336	165	166	197
Women	13	17	20	13	14	17
% of total	3.3	4.5	6.0	7.8	8.4	8.6
Lib. Dem.	23 ^a	22 ^b	20	46	52	62
Women	0	1	2	3	5	10
% of total	0	4.5	10	6.5	9.6	16.1
Other	21	23	24	30	29	31
Women	0	2	3	3	4	3
% of total	0	8.7	12.5	10	13.8	9.7
All MPs	650	650	651	659	659	645
Women	23	41	60	120	118	128
% of total	3.5	6.3	9.2	18.2	17.9	19.8

^aLiberals and SDP combined

^bSDP Liberal Alliance



Scotland and Wales, however, had long embraced the equal representation of women and men as one of the primary goals of devolved government. Indeed, in Scotland, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats signed an Electoral Contract promising to field an equal number of male and female candidates, especially in the seats that they expected to win. After voters approved plans for devolution that established the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales, the Labour and nationalist parties in both Scotland and Wales initiated discussions on measures that would not only be legal, but that would also actually result in a relatively high number of women being elected. In the light of the new additional-member electoral system, combining first-past-the-post and proportional list elections, parties interested in promoting female candidates pursued a variety of different strategies. The Scottish and Welsh Labour parties realized that they would win the most seats in the constituency elections, and for this reason, they agreed to ‘twin’ districts on the basis of geography and winnability and then to select a woman as a candidate for one of the constituencies and a man as the candidate for the other. The Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru, on the other hand, recognized that they would be likely to win most of their seats through the list elections. Although proposals to ‘zip’ lists — that is, to alternate between men and women on the lists — were narrowly defeated in the SNP, they were approved in Plaid Cymru in the form that women would occupy the first and third places on the five regional lists. These measures resulted in the election of 37.2% women to the Scottish Parliament and 40% women to the National Assembly for Wales in 1999, with the highest proportion of women winning their seats in constituency elections (see Tables 2 and 3).

Despite these remarkable gains in women’s representation, lingering concerns over the legal status of gender quotas meant that few parties were able to agree on any form of positive action for women in the run-up to elections to Westminster in 2001. Without all-women shortlists, however, many inside the Labour party began to worry that local parties would select only men in the seats where a sitting Labour MP was retiring, leading to a drop in the number of women in the House of Commons. Thus, while the party required gender-balanced shortlists for all vacant seats, there were only 4 women among the 39 candidates chosen to replace sitting Labour MPs. Although Labour nonetheless continued to elect the highest proportion of women of all the parties, the weakness of this policy led to a slight decrease in the percentage of women elected in 2001 to 17.9%. This drop, along with new analyses showing that changes to the Sex Discrimination Act would not in fact violate international treaty agreements, led the new government to propose reforms to the Act that would allow parties to take steps to increase women’s political representation. Given the permissive — and not prescriptive — nature of the bill, both major opposition parties consciously decided not to object to the



Table 2 The number of women MSPs from the main parties elected at the last two elections to the Scottish Parliament

	1999			2003		
	<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Regional</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Regional</i>	<i>Total</i>
Labour	53	3	56	46	4	50
Women	26	2	28	26	2	28
% of total	49	66.6	50	56.5	50	56
SNP	7	28	35	9	18	27
Women	0	13	13	3	6	9
% of total	28.5	46.4	42.9	33.3	33.3	33.3
Conservative	0	18	18	3	15	18
Women	0	3	3	0	4	4
% of total	0	16.7	16.7	0	26.7	22.2
Lib. Dem.	12	5	17	13	4	17
Women	2	0	2	2	0	2
% of total	16.6	0	11.8	18.2	0	11.8
Other	1	2	3	2	15	17
Women	1	1	2	1	7	8
% of total	100	50	75	50	46.7	47
All MPs	73	56	129	73	56	129
Women	29	19	48	32	19	51
% of total	39.7	33.9	37.2	43.8	33.9	39.5

reform, enabling the bill to pass all its stages in parliament without a vote and become law in early 2002.

These reforms occurred as parties began to select candidates for the second elections in 2003 to the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales, creating new opportunities for parties to consider positive action. Although the Scottish Labour Party did not repeat its twinning strategy, it did pick women to head its lists in the two areas where it stood the best chance of gaining new seats, enabling the percentage of women in the Scottish Parliament to increase to 39.5%. The Welsh Labour Party similarly did not use twinning, but did apply all-women shortlists in half of its vacant constituency seats, while Plaid Cymru strengthened its requirements for list elections by reserving the top two seats on all regional lists for women. These changes brought the total proportion of women in the National Assembly for Wales to 50%. Around this time, the three major national parties initiated similar discussions as to whether or not to adopt any special measures to recruit more female candidates, but



Table 3 The number of women AMs from the main parties elected at the last two elections to the National Assembly for Wales

	1999			2003		
	<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Regional</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Regional</i>	<i>Total</i>
Labour	27	1	28	30	0	30
Women	15	0	15	19	0	19
% of total	55.5	0	53.6	63	0	63
Plaid Cymru	9	8	17	5	7	12
Women	2	4	6	1	5	6
% of total	22.2	50.0	29.4	20	71.4	50
Conservative	1	8	9	1	10	11
Women	0	0	0	0	2	2
% of total	0	0	0	0	20	18.2
Lib. Dem.	3	3	6	3	3	6
Women	2	1	3	2	1	3
% of total	66.7	33.3	50	66.6	33.3	50
Other	0	0	0	1	0	1
Women	0	0	0	0	0	0
% of total	0	0	0	0	0	0
All MPs	40	20	60	40	20	60
Women	19	5	24	22	8	30
% of total	47.5	25	40	55	40	50

only Labour decided to pursue positive action by re-embracing all-women shortlists. This policy, combined with the increased recruitment of women by the Liberal Democrats, produced a small increase in the percentage of women in the House of Commons to 19.8% in 2005.³ These developments, taken together, reveal the crucial impact of gender quotas in British politics: the dramatic rise in women's representation in the House of Commons, the Scottish Parliament, and the National Assembly for Wales is clearly driven by changes in the candidate selection practices of a limited number of political parties, most notably the Labour parties in all three arenas of government.

Approaches and Methods in Gender Quotas Research in British Politics

British theory and methods textbooks identify a range of theoretical approaches, as well as quantitative and qualitative methods, employed by



political scientists in the UK (Harrison, 2001; Marsh and Stoker, 2002; Burnham *et al.*, 2004). Key theories include institutionalism, behaviouralism, interpretivism, and rational choice, while major methods encompass surveys, statistical analysis, interviews, questionnaires, first-hand accounts, participant observation, discourse analysis, content analysis, and process-tracing. Research on gender quotas reflects these diverse possibilities, as scholars engage distinct theoretical paradigms with the help of a variety of methodological tools. This pluralism, we argue, stands in marked contrast to the specialization that has been a hallmark of academic disciplines in recent years. Indeed, given that one feature of this specialization has been the division between political philosophy and empirical political science (Shapiro, 2002, 596–597), it is significant that feminist research on gender quotas has addressed normative questions as to why the under-representation of women might matter (Phillips, 1995, 1998) and how one should conceptualize political representation (Phillips, 1995; Squires, 1996, 1999, 2001). Nonetheless, feminist empirical work clearly favours certain theories and methods over others: a majority of studies are institutionalist or behaviouralist in nature, although interpretive approaches are increasingly more popular, while most data emerges from elite interviews and surveys, although discourse and content analysis are growing as alternative methods. In this section, we distinguish the main strands of feminist research within each theoretical perspective to note the depth and breadth of these contributions. We then disaggregate the body of work within each approach according to the types of methods used, uncovering the multiple strategies that scholars have pursued in analysing quota adoption and implementation.

Institutionalism

Institutionalism — or, more properly, ‘new’ institutionalism — understands the dynamics of political life in terms of the formal political organizations, as well as the informal patterns of behaviour, that shape the perceptions and decisions of political actors that, in turn, influence the outcomes of political action. Although it comes in a number of distinct variations (cf. Hall and Taylor, 1996; Peters, 1999), the core of this approach is its focus on the formal and informal structures that resist and facilitate political change (Lowndes, 2002). Given certain parallels between such structures and ‘gender’ as a social category, it is perhaps not surprising that research on gender and politics has moved towards more systematic investigation of the ways in which formal and informal institutions mirror and enforce gender inequalities (Lovenduski, 1998; Randall, 2002; Mackay, 2004). Within the more specific literature on gender quotas, this ‘institutional turn’ is especially evident in two particular research areas: (1) work that examines the form and impact of quotas in the light of different electoral systems, and (2) studies that analyse the formal and



informal discourses on equality that aid and constrain quota adoption and implementation.

Scholars who address quotas and electoral systems generally focus on one of three themes: the unusual form that quotas take in Britain due to its single-member district, first-past-the-post electoral system (Russell, 2003, 2005); the differences across quota policies and their effects on the proportion of women in Westminster as compared with the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales (Brown *et al.*, 2002; Edwards and McAllister, 2002); and the challenges posed by developments in Scotland and Wales, and to a lesser extent in Westminster, to the conventional wisdom that few changes in women's representation are possible in single-member district, first-past-the-post electoral systems (Russell *et al.*, 2002). To probe these dynamics, feminist researchers employ quantitative techniques like surveys to explore differences in the background and attitudinal profiles of party members, applicants, candidates, and MPs (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995), as well as statistical analyses incorporating data on candidate selection, voting patterns, and possible electoral swings to generate predictions on the percentage of female and minority candidates likely to be elected across the major political parties (Childs *et al.*, 2005). They also make use of more qualitative methods like interviews and questionnaires to gain insights into the experiences of female candidates at each step of the selection process, especially when constituency parties resist the application of quotas (Lovenduski, 1997; Eagle and Lovenduski, 1998; Edwards and Chapman, 2000, 2003; Russell, 2003; Harrison, 2005); first-hand accounts and participant observation to uncover the origins of specific quota policies, as well as the mechanics of their application over several election cycles (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Short, 1996; May, 2004); content analysis of the parties' official literature on candidate selection to track changes in their criteria over time (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Childs *et al.*, 2005); and process-tracing to narrate and analyse the multiple processes leading to policy changes inside the British, Scottish, and Welsh parties regarding the selection of female candidates (Mackay *et al.*, 2003; Dobrowolsky, 2005; Russell, 2005).

Work on the discourses of equality that influence quota adoption and impact is similarly multi-faceted, with scholars examining — alternatively and in conjunction with one another — the formal and informal party (Squires, 1996; Russell *et al.*, 2002), national (Norris, 1997; Charles, 2004; Krook *et al.*, 2006), and international (Russell, 2000; Krook, 2005a) laws and norms of equality that facilitate and undermine quota application in the UK. Although often not couched in institutionalist terms, this research speaks to the concerns of this approach through its attention to the normative opportunities for and limits to policy innovation. As these norms are generally difficult to quantify, most studies in this vein utilize qualitative techniques like discourse analysis to



outline arguments for and against quotas, made either on the basis of competing party or individual opinions regarding the legitimacy of positive action (Squires, 1996; Norris, 1997; Eagle and Lovenduski, 1998; Studlar and McAllister, 1998), or with reference to existing or emerging legal provisions concerning the scope and meaning of equal opportunities (Lovenduski, 1997; Russell, 2000, 2003; Childs, 2002a, 2003). Scholars also engage in content analysis of parliamentary debates (Childs, 2002b; Russell, 2003), national court cases (Russell, 2000), national equality documents (Chaney, 2004; Charles, 2004), and international legislation (Russell, 2000) to analyse changing possibilities for quota reform, as well as in process-tracing to track developments in these debates over time as actors adopt new attitudes towards quota policies and the content of legal documents moves towards allowing more positive action in candidate selection (Russell, 2005).

Behaviouralism

Behaviouralism views the dynamics of political life through the lens of observable behaviour, at the level of the individual or the social aggregate, to establish patterns of action that can then serve as a basis for political analysis. These behaviours may be as diverse as voting, decision-making by political elites, participation in social movements, strategies of interest groups and political parties, and tactics of state and non-state actors, but the element common to all these studies is their attention to what actors do and possible reasons for their actual choices (Sanders, 2002).⁴ As this approach offers a window into the micro-level behaviours that shape collective results, a great deal of work on gender and politics understandably adopts this approach, in light of curiosity about what women do once in political office, as well as interest in the party political processes that lead to changes in candidate selection procedures. Within the literature on gender quotas, this focus on behaviour is prevalent in two specific veins of research: (1) studies that investigate the impact of quotas with reference to the actions of individual women legislators, and (2) work that documents the interventions and motivations of political parties and women's organizations in debates over quota adoption and implementation.

Researchers who ask whether quotas lead to the increased substantive representation of women analyse the legislative behaviour of individual women MPs to determine whether or not women and men diverge in terms of their policy priorities (Childs, 2001a; Childs and Withey, 2004), legislative styles (Childs, 2004a), bill proposals (Childs, 2004c; Manasco, 2005), policy votes (Childs, 2004b; Manasco, 2005), behind-the-scenes behaviour (Manasco, 2005), and propensity to rebel against party leaders (Cowley and Childs, 2003). Interested in establishing both similarities and differences, they apply a



range of quantitative and qualitative measures to gauge women's ability to articulate feminist concerns. Quantitative studies draw on surveys of male and female politicians to detect possible differences in their attitudes and values on women's issues (Lovenduski and Norris, 2003), as well as on statistical analyses to probe distinctions among women and men with regard to standard legislative behaviour (Childs, 2004b; Manasco, 2005) and to less common legislative activities (Cowley and Childs, 2003; Childs and Withey, 2004). Qualitative research, on the other hand, conducts interviews to track whether political issues and styles of debate have shifted following the sudden influx of women in the late 1990s (Mackay, 2001; Childs, 2002b, 2004a, 2004b; Mackay *et al.*, 2003; Chaney, 2004); questionnaires to reveal the constraints of motherhood on women's full participation in parliamentary life (McKay, 2005); discourse analysis to examine how often and in what ways female MPs intervene in parliamentary debates on issues of direct concern to women (Childs, 2002b; Bird, 2005); and process-tracing to piece together the multiple trajectories of actors and events that meet to produce the passage of bills promoting women's interests (Childs, 2004c).

Studies of political parties and women's organizations, in contrast, focus more exclusively on women's descriptive representation by tracking debates inside the parties on quota adoption and implementation at distinct levels of government (Brown, 1996; Bradbury *et al.*, 2000; Edwards and McAllister, 2002; Russell *et al.*, 2002; Russell, 2003; Chaney, 2004; Squires, 2004; Lovenduski, 2005) and moments in time (Lovenduski and Randall, 1993; McDonald *et al.*, 2001; Russell, 2003; Childs, 2004b), as well as activities of women's groups to pressure parties to select more female candidates (McDonald *et al.*, 2001; Dobrowolsky, 2002; Russell *et al.*, 2002; Chaney, 2004). Given the small sample size, as well as the more contingent nature of these events, few analyses in this research area make use of surveys or statistical analysis. Instead, they rely much more heavily on interviews to uncover elite motivations for pursuing quotas (Chaney, 2004; Russell, 2005), as well as to chart the mobilization of women inside the parties in favour of these policies (Perrigo, 1996, 1999; Russell, 2005); questionnaires to compare processes of quota implementation across parties and across constituencies, especially when they involve conflicts between local and national party organizations (Bradbury *et al.*, 2000); first-hand accounts to reveal the intra-party struggles that result in the adoption of quotas, despite most members' primary concern to pass other political reforms (Galloway and Robertson, 1991; McDougall, 1998); discourse analysis to gauge the impact of legal arguments on party decisions to adopt and implement quota policies (Davidson and Webster, 2000; McDonald *et al.*, 2001); and process-tracing to map the various changes inside the Labour Party that culminate in the adoption of all-women shortlists (Russell, 2005), as well as the impact of the *Jepson* decision and reform of the



Sex Discrimination Act on subsequent party selection procedures (Brown, 1996; Brown *et al.*, 2002; Edwards and McAllister, 2002; Russell *et al.*, 2002; Chaney, 2003; Russell, 2003; Childs, 2004b).

Interpretivism

Interpretivism engages the dynamics of political life through attention to the meanings — present in beliefs, ideas, and discourses — that reflect and inform human action. While the specific ‘texts’ under examination may be articulated in the words and actions of individuals, or performed through the norms and practices of collective institutions, the ultimate aim of this approach is to understand the subjects under study rather than to explain their behaviour (Bevir and Rhodes, 2002). This approach is thus generally framed as an alternative to positivist approaches in political science, but while most feminist work in IR is post-positivist (Tickner, 2005), a much smaller proportion of work on gender and politics adopts this perspective. Within the literature on gender quotas, interest in meaning is nonetheless manifested in at least two distinct tracks of research: (1) work that records and analyses how individual politicians conceptualize terms like ‘representation’ and ‘feminism,’ and (2) studies that explore how institutional spaces embody — both implicitly and explicitly — beliefs about the ‘male’ as the norm.

Scholars interested in the micro-level examine the beliefs and discourses of individuals to map the competing definitions, as well as dominant understandings, of controversial and ambiguous terms like ‘representation’ (Childs, 2001b; Chaney and Fevre, 2002) and ‘feminism’ (Childs, 2001a) in contexts already marked by vibrant discussions over the validity of gender quotas. In the light of their interest in language, these researchers typically avoid quantitative methods like surveys and statistical analysis in favour of more qualitative techniques like interviews to allow politicians to speak in their own words about the need for and benefits of increased descriptive representation (Chaney and Fevre, 2002), the form and content of representing women’s interests (Childs, 2001b, 2004b), and the meaning and relevance of feminism to women MPs (Childs, 2001a); discourse analysis to parse the arguments regarding representation made by female MPs in debates over the proposed reform of the Sex Discrimination Act (Childs, 2002a); and content analysis to determine how ‘inclusiveness’ has been formulated in party and national policies aimed at promoting the increased representation of politically marginalized groups (Chaney and Fevre, 2002).

Work on the macro-level is slightly more abstract, as researchers consider relatively under-observed aspects of parliamentary life to theorize ways in which they reflect institutional biases and assumptions that take the ‘male’ experience as the norm. The two studies that take this approach employ



traditional qualitative methods in less conventional ways, drawing on interviews with women and minorities to elicit their perceptions of their experiences in parliament and to analyse their — often conflicting — interpretations as to whether or not they had suffered deliberate acts of discrimination (Ross, 2002), as well as the more general effect of their presence in provoking discomfort among the majority of men in parliament (Puwar, 2004). They then combine these insights with participant observation to sketch the parameters of parliaments as ‘male’ spaces by documenting the reactions of male parliamentarians to their new female colleagues as ‘space invaders’ (Puwar, 2004), as well as the physical characteristics of parliamentary buildings that reflect and reinforce the status of men as the norm, like the size and location of women’s toilets, the height of seats in the parliamentary chamber, and the types of materials used in the floors (Ross, 2002).

Rational choice

Rational choice interprets the dynamics of political life through the calculations of individuals who are often self-interested and, when faced with several possible courses of action, usually do what they believe will lead to the best overall outcome. Although it does not assume that people always act rationally (Levi, 1997), the heart of this approach is its attempt to model — according to some system of logic — the structure of political phenomena like electoral behaviour, party competition, collective action, legislative behaviour, and strategic games (Ward, 2002). It is rarely used as a lens in research on gender and politics, in part because a great deal of work on gender criticizes the male biases that permeate Western notions of rationality (cf. Lloyd, 1984), and in part because feminist research — unlike rational choice theory — is more oriented towards problem-driven, rather than methods-driven, questions in political analysis (Green and Shapiro, 1994). Nonetheless, within the literature on gender quotas, a rational choice perspective could prove useful in developing new perspectives on enduring puzzles in this field that share certain parallels with concerns in rational choice research: (1) studies that aim to explain why parties adopt — and do not adopt — quotas, which many authors attribute to electoral calculations and party competition (Lovenduski and Norris, 1993; Matland and Studlar, 1996; Caul, 2001; Krook, 2002), and (2) work that seeks to understand why female MPs do not always appear to ‘act for’ women, which some scholars describe in terms of collective action problems and strategic games when they theorize these women’s choices in terms of their lack of policy alliances with other women and their desire not to pursue controversial decisions in order to preserve their chances for re-election (Tremblay and Pelletier, 2000; Carroll, 2002; Childs, 2004b). Evidence for these claims might be gathered in any number of different ways, including through



surveys, statistical analysis, interviews, questionnaires, and process-tracing (see Table 4).

Conclusions

Feminist research thus embodies a range of theoretical orientations and applies a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods to study the adoption and implementation of gender quotas in British politics. Categorizing these studies by approach and method, we make three final observations regarding this theoretical and methodological eclecticism, which sheds more light on enduring issues in political research. First, in addition to the empty boxes under rational choice, there are notable gaps in methodological diversity across theoretical approaches. While institutionalists utilize all major research methods, behaviouralists rarely conduct participant observation or content analysis, and interpretivists do not make use of surveys, statistical analysis, questionnaires, first-hand accounts, or process-tracing. These choices reflect the distinct epistemological perspectives that inform these approaches: institutionalism focuses on the formal and informal manifestations of structural constraints on political action, meaning it can and must employ a variety of methods in order to perceive these constraints; behaviouralism analyses only observable behaviour, implying that it precludes action undertaken by the observer, as well as secondary documentary evidence; and interpretivism centres on the meanings inherent in ideas and discourses articulated explicitly by individuals and implicitly by institutions, limiting sample sizes, the utility of first-hand accounts, and the possibility of tracing change over time.

Second, a number of individual researchers move among theoretical approaches across various pieces of their work. Five scholars in particular, through their single and co-authored studies, span multiple theoretical schools: Paul Chaney and Sarah Childs shift between institutionalism (Childs, 2002a, b; 2003; Chaney, 2004; Childs *et al.*, 2005), behaviouralism (Childs, 2002b, 2004a, b, 2005; Cowley and Childs, 2003; Chaney, 2003, 2004; Childs and Withey, 2004), and interpretivism (Chaney and Fevre, 2002; Childs, 2001a, b, 2002a, 2004b), while Joni Lovenduski, Fiona Mackay, and Meg Russell alter between institutionalism (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Lovenduski, 1997; Eagle and Lovenduski, 1998; Russell, 2000, 2003, 2005; Mackay, 2001; Mackay *et al.*, 2003; Childs *et al.*, 2005) and behaviouralism (Russell *et al.*, 2002; Lovenduski and Norris, 2003; Russell, 2003, 2005). This openness to distinct methodologies most probably constitutes an attempt to analyse and understand gendered patterns of behaviour by considering both their agentic and structural aspects, as institutionalism is a structure-based theory, behaviouralism is an agency-based theory, and interpretivism is a structure-through-agency-based theory.

Table 4 Approaches and methods in feminist research on gender quotas in British politics

	<i>Institutionalism</i>	<i>Behaviouralism</i>	<i>Interpretivism</i>	<i>Rational choice</i>
Surveys	Norris and Lovenduski (1995)	Lovenduski and Norris (2003)		
Statistical analysis	Childs <i>et al.</i> (2005)	Childs (2004b); Childs and Withey (2004); Cowley and Childs (2003); Manasco (2005)		
Interviews	Edwards and Chapman (2000); Edwards and Chapman (2003); Eagle and Lovenduski (1998); Lovenduski (1997); Russell (2003)	Chaney (2004); Childs (2002b); Childs (2004a); Childs (2004b); Mackay (2001); Mackay, Myers, and Brown (2003); Perrigo (1996); Perrigo (1999); Russell (2005)	Chaney and Fevre (2002); Childs (2001a); Childs (2001b); Childs (2004b); Puwar (2004); Ross (2002)	
Questionnaires	Edwards and Chapman (2000); Harrison (2005)	Bradbury <i>et al.</i> (2000); McKay (2005)		
First-hand accounts	May 2004; Short (1996)	Galloway and Robertson (1991); McDougall (1998)		
Participant observation	Norris and Lovenduski (1995)		Puwar (2004); Ross (2002)	
Discourse analysis	Childs (2002a); Childs (2003); Eagle and Lovenduski (1998); Lovenduski (1997); Norris (1997); Russell (2000); Russell (2003); Squires (1996); Studlar and McAllister (1998)	Bird (2005); Childs (2002b); Davidson and Webster (2000); McDonald, Alexander, and Sutherland (2001)	Childs (2002a)	
Content analysis	Chaney (2004); Charles (2004); Childs (2002b); Childs, Campbell, and Lovenduski (2005); Norris and Lovenduski (1995); Russell (2000); Russell (2003)		Chaney and Fevre (2002)	
Process-tracing	Dobrowolsky (2005); Mackay, Myers, and Brown (2003); Russell (2005)	Brown (1996); Brown <i>et al.</i> (2002); Chaney (2003); Childs (2004b); Childs (2004c); Edwards and McAllister (2002); Russell (2003); Russell (2005); Russell, Mackay, and McAllister (2002)		





Third, studies within single approaches often employ multiple methods within these perspectives. These works generally combine quantitative and qualitative methods — or alternatively, macro- and micro-level analyses — within institutionalism (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Lovenduski 1997; Eagle and Lovenduski, 1998; Edwards and Chapman, 2003; Russell, 2003; Childs *et al.*, 2005), behaviouralism (Childs, 2002b, 2004b; Russell, 2005), and interpretivism (Chaney and Fevre, 2002; Ross, 2002; Puwar, 2004). This decision to utilize several distinct methods no doubt represents an effort to ‘triangulate’ research findings by viewing the same phenomenon or puzzle through a variety of different lenses that investigate larger and smaller samples, namely surveys and statistical analyses *vs* questionnaires and process-tracing, as well as human-based and text-based data, notably interviews and first-hand accounts versus discourse and content analysis. This research strategy, we argue, typifies feminist political research in general, which is characterized by a pragmatic appeal to a wide range of methodological frames, rather than by a distinctive methodology of its own. Rather than perceiving this to be a weakness, undermining any notion of an overarching ‘feminist’ perspective, we suggest that this methodological eclecticism is a strength, signalling the ability of feminist researchers to produce multifaceted research findings. Through its commitment to problem-driven — rather than method-driven — work, feminist research thus illustrates how methodological pluralism works, making it a model of good practice in the study of politics in general.

Notes

- 1 This article was written while Mona Lena Krook was an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Politics, University of Bristol, 2004-5. The research for the article was made possible by the ESRC’s financial support during this period.
- 2 Britain comprises England, Scotland, and Wales. The United Kingdom comprises Britain and Northern Ireland. Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998 will not be considered in this survey. No parties adopted candidate gender quotas in this election, and the proportion of women elected was 13%. The Assembly is currently suspended.
- 3 We are grateful to Sarah Childs for providing us with data on the 2005 election.
- 4 While we work with Sanders’s (2002) definition of behaviouralism in this article, we recognize that behaviouralism has been defined elsewhere in a more restrictive fashion to entail claims that generalizations must be testable and that the ethical and the empirical should be kept distinct (cf. Easton 1967). We consider feminist political research in relation to the former rather than the latter definition.

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