

Controversy

Gender, Politics and Political Science: A Reply to Michael Moran

Sarah Childs

University of Bristol

Mona Lena Krook

Washington University, St Louis, USA

Our article (Childs and Krook, 2006) had two aims: (1) to delineate the ‘sub-field’ of gender and politics in the UK in terms of its research foci, output, strength and impact on the wider discipline; (2) to foreground the question of how to know when women have ‘made a difference’ in politics by offering a critique of the concept of ‘critical mass’ (cf. Childs and Krook, forthcoming).¹ Michael Moran brings these two halves of the article together by charging that biological essentialism haunts our analysis of the former, even as we seek to avoid it in the latter. More specifically, he claims that because we draw attention to the complicated rather than straightforward relationship between women’s descriptive and substantive representation, we unwittingly undermine our critique of the failure of British textbooks sufficiently to address gender and politics. Moreover, he argues, we fail to recognise that all identities are multiple, revealing – more generally – the ‘conceptual incoherence in the way that textbooks’ treat questions of identity (Moran, 2006, pp. 200–202).

Moran is right to acknowledge that the study of politics has long failed to recognise gendered identities. To remedy this, the first stage of gender and politics research highlighted women’s exclusion from politics, while the second stage ‘added’ and ‘stirred’ women into existing political frameworks. The third and current stage, however, has begun to raise more fundamental questions about political science methods/approaches, narrow definitions of ‘politics’ and the gendered nature of political institutions and processes (Randall, 2002). As a result, feminist scholars have largely shifted their focus from ‘sex’ to ‘gender’. This revised focus has two broad implications for political research: (1) it moves the analytical focus away from *biological sex*, which treats men and women as binary opposites, to *constructed gender identities*, which view masculinity and femininity as features that exist along a continuum, often in combination with other identities; (2) it replaces an exclusive concern with *women* in politics and public policy, with careful attention to the impact of *masculinities and femininities*, as well as *relations between men and women*, on political inputs and outcomes. Feminist scholars are thus deeply sensitive to questions of multiple identities. Indeed, many of the current research frontiers address



questions of intersectionality (McCall, 2005), as well as the importance of men's and women's gendered identities for their access and behaviour in political office (Lawless and Fox, 2005).

Moran thus glosses over the theoretical complexity and sophistication of much feminist work in political science. The root of this misunderstanding is the common but erroneous conflation he makes between 'women' and 'gender' (cf. Carver, 1996). This is evident in the sentence where he argues in favour of abandoning a 'single focus on gender', which he equates with the 'proportion of pages given over to the recruitment of women'. It is also clear in the categorical equivalence he gives to 'gender' and other identities such as 'class' and 'religion'. However, the shift from 'sex' to 'gender' in feminist research reveals that men, as well as women, have gendered identities. Furthermore, 'gender' is present in, and partly expressed through, other identities: working-class men and women often meet distinct challenges in their everyday lives, despite their common experience of class oppression, while religious norms dictate quite different behaviours for men and women, despite their shared faith. A focus on 'gender', therefore, is less about including 'women', than about rethinking all categories in ways that improve political analysis.

To illustrate this point, we could draw on the very narrative that Moran supplies as a way of revealing the weaknesses of a gendered lens, in order to show how his story would be much improved by way of a gendered account. He claims that the feminisation of the British party system in recent years – understood here as the increased election of women to political assemblies – is better conceived in terms of an 'evolution of elite recruitment', which is 'restricting elite positions to those prepared to make a lifelong career in politics' (Moran, 2006, pp. 200–201). He notes that this development works to exclude other 'groups once better represented' such as 'manual workers and the very poor' (ibid., p. 201). What is striking about his view is the ways in which it parallels the work of feminist scholars on the transformation of the Labour party (Perrigo, 1999; Russell, 2005), which demonstrates how attention to 'gender' offers a richer account of political change – one that captures shifts in class relations, the constituencies of political parties, the weight of various social movements and the personnel elected to political assemblies – than narratives that overlook their gendered dimensions.

Believing for these reasons that a gendered lens should be incorporated into all types of political analysis, our original article examined a number of recent British politics textbooks to gauge their attention to issues related to women, gender and feminism. We used the number of pages devoted to these topics as a surrogate measure of the impact of gender and politics research on mainstream political science (Stokes, 2005). Edited books on British politics are particularly important because, as Moran admits, 'textbooks have a synthesising function' and 'express the conventional wisdom of a discipline' (Moran, 2006, pp. 200 and 201). Thus, if 'gender' really does have 'well-organised voices in the discipline', as he claims (ibid., p. 201), we should expect these textbooks to have many more pages on these kinds of issues. Indeed, research on women's political recruitment – our specific focus – should be the *easiest* gender and politics literature to incorporate, precisely because its questions and methods do not necessarily challenge traditional conceptions of 'politics' (i.e. it does not seek to expand it to include the private realm), its

contributions are largely situated within dominant theoretical approaches (i.e. institutionalism, behaviouralism, interpretivism and rational choice; cf. Krook and Squires, 2006) and it involves asking questions that can be easily quantified (i.e. it is objective rather than subjective, a charge often levelled at feminist research).

The concept of 'gender' is deeply destabilising to all existing categories of political analysis, but it is precisely for this reason that we argue for it to be taken more seriously in the study of British politics. While we could simply direct our research to our own sub-field, we are concerned that lack of attention to 'gender' prevents better knowledge of more general processes of political stability and change. For us, it is especially striking that even the most mainstream-friendly research on gender and politics remains largely marginal to the 'conventional wisdom', when it provides crucial new insights on topics such as candidate selection, professionalisation and party politics. Thus, we strongly disagree with Moran that 'the difficulty is not that we are paying too little attention to gender, but too much' (Moran, 2006, p. 200). Rather, we would argue that the study of British politics would improve through more careful attention to gender, which would reveal not only the dynamics that exclude women, but also the processes that influence how men and women of all identities have their voices heard – or silenced – through politics and scholarship.

Notes

We would like to thank Michael Moran, whose response to our article enables another discussion of gender and politics research in a mainstream political science journal. With a whiff of conflict between female and male, and younger and more established academics, perhaps it will also lead those who may have overlooked our article to read it now for the first time.

- 1 We should acknowledge that the previous editors of *Politics*, Paul Taggart and Charles Lees, asked us to be provocative. We hope they are pleased that our article has stimulated this kind of debate.

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