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# NEW WAYS OF RESEARCHING WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLIES: THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND EMPIRICAL APPLICATIONS OF FEMINIST INSTITUTIONALISM

A b s t r a c t

Feminist institutionalism is a variant of new institutionalism that focuses on the interplay between formal and informal institutions and the gendered nature of institutions and has been used to study gender dynamics in parliamentary assemblies. The contribution of the article is twofold. Theoretically, it sets out the building blocks, conceptual components and key assumptions of feminist institutionalism and examines the ways in which it differs from other strands of new institutionalism. It demonstrates the range of empirical applications of FI and its potential for future studies of parliamentary assemblies. Furthermore, it contributes to the methodological discussion by showing that while feminist institutionalist research has predominantly used qualitative methods, there is also potential for using quantitative methods to address the questions posed by feminist institutionalist scholars.

K e y w o r d s: feminist institutionalism, new institutionalism, gender, legislatures, European Parliament, quantitative methodology.

## INTRODUCTION

Women remain underrepresented in world's parliaments. The global average share of women in parliaments amounts to 26.9 percent. The average for Europe equals to 31.7 percent. The average is lower for

Central and Eastern Europe: 26.3 percent.[1] Despite the considerable progress made towards gender equality in areas such as education and employment, the political sphere has remained a relatively resistant area of change throughout the twentieth century. This is despite the fact that the drive for gender equality has been a prominent feature of social development in Europe.[2]

Male-dominated parliaments do not represent, and are likely to neglect, the concerns and interests of more than half of the electorate.[3] It is therefore essential to continuously search for new ways to understand the continuity of women's political underrepresentation in parliaments despite various positive actions towards gender equality, as well as to explain a change in this phenomenon. Feminist institutionalism (FI)—a distinct theoretical approach built on new institutionalism—provides a lens that can help with such inquiry. Feminist institutionalism is a variant of new institutionalism that focuses on the interplay between formal and informal institutions and the gendered character of institutions. It has been employed to examine gender dynamics in parliamentary assemblies.

This article provides a two-fold contribution. Theoretically, it presents the building bricks, the conceptual components, and the main and assumptions of feminist institutionalism and examines the ways it is distinctive from other strands of new institutionalism. It presents the range of empirical applications of FI and its potential for future studies of parliamentary assemblies. What is more, it contributes to the methodological discussion by showing that while feminist institutionalist research predominantly employs qualitative methodologies, there is also a potential for application of quantitative methods in order to purse questions asked by feminist institutionalist scholars.

[1] Data for lower chamber/unicameral, as of 1 October 2024, IPU Parliane, https://data.ipu.org/women-averages/?date_month=10&date_year=2024 (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accesible on 9 January 2025).

[2] V. Christmas-Best and U. Kjær, 'Why So Few and Why So Slow? Women as Parliamentary Representatives in Europe from a Longitudinal Perspective', in *Democratic Representation in Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 77–105, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199234202.003.0004.

[3] N. Hopkinson, *Parliamentary Democracy: Is There a Perfect Model?* (Routledge, 2001), p. 59, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315196787.

# LAYING THE FOUNDATION: NEW INSTITUTIONALISM AND FEMINIST THEORY

## ON THE NATURE OF INSTITUTIONS AND NEW INSTITUTIONALISM

Feminist institutionalism emerges from new institutionalism and feminist theory. The institutional turn in political science draws attention to institutions, 'rules of the game', that shape political life. It places significant emphasis on the role of institutions as a pivotal explanatory variable within the domain of political analysis. It encompasses a range of themes, including formal and informal institutions, the processes of institutional creation, continuity and change, structural influences and agency, and the dynamics of power.[4]

Defining what exactly an *institution* is constitutes a highly complex and intricate task. It can denote many things depending on the context, on the intention of the person who uses the term, and on the theoretical or conceptual framework applied. B. Guy Peters lists essential features of an institution: (1) goes beyond an individual and instead involves groups of individuals in a series of repetitive interactions that are predictable due to specified relational dynamics amongst the actors involved; (2) is characterised by at least some extent of stability; (3) restrains behaviours of individuals; (4) members of the institution possess a feeling of common meaning and values.[5] Vivien Lowndes created threshold conditions for political institutions: they are '(1) specific to a particular political or governmental setting; (2) recognised by actors, if not always adhered to; (3) they shape political behaviour in a relatively predictable and stable manner; (4) they are subject to some sort of third-party enforcement'.[6]

Formal rules are crucially important as they vastly structure political behaviour. They can be defined as 'codified rules, with enforcement and legitimacy'.[7] They include state institutions, state-enforced regulations such as law, constitutions, regulations, and so-called 'organization rules'

[4] F. Mackay, M. Kenny, and L. Chappell, 'New Institutionalism through a Gender Lens: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism?', *International Political Science Review* 31: 5, 2010, pp. 573–88, https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512110388788.

[5] B. Guy Peters, *Institutional Theory in Political Science: The New Institutionalism* (Pinter, 1999).

[6] V. Lowndes, 'How Are Political Institutions Gendered?', *Political Studies* 68: 3, 2020, pp. 548–49, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719867667.

[7] G. Helmke and S. Levitsky, 'Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda', *Perspectives on Politics* 2: 4, 2004, p. 727, https://doi.org/10.4337/9781781001219.00011.

which are official rules governing entities such as corporations, interest groups or political parties.[8] What is new in the *new* institutionalism (compared to the 'old' institutionalism) is the focus on not only *formal*, but also *informal* institutions. By shedding light on informal practices and conventions, new institutionalism was able to more faithfully and realistically depict and understand the complex and perplexing mechanisms of political life. Informal institutions are 'socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels' The mode of transmission of these practices is through demonstration: 'actors understand how they are supposed to behave through observing the routinized actions of others and seeking to recreate those actions'.[9]

## FEMINIST THEORY AND FEMINIST POLITICAL ANALYSIS

As a political movement, feminism tackles inequality and discrimination of women in social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions. The feminist political agenda has its origins in the emergence of radical feminism and the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Introducing the concepts of 'the personal is political' and the political character of male–female relations, it had a profound impact on how politics was defined by Western political scientists.[10]

Feminist political theory questions and critiques institutions and ideologies that support the underprivilege of women and attempts to transform these institutions. It is concerned with power relations (gendered, but also physical, racial, class-based, cultural) and challenges the existing modes of political discussion and debate.[11] Feminist theories are profoundly diversified, but via a steadfastly interdisciplinary approach they generally aim 'to illuminate the barriers and constraints that circumscribe women's lives, explain their dynamics and persistence, and identify mechanisms for change'.[12]

From the feminist political theory emerges the feminist political analysis. Political analysis deals with power, how is it distributed,

[8] Helmke and Levitsky, 'Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics', p. 727.

[9] V. Lowndes and M. Roberts, *Why Institutions Matter: The New Institutionalism in Political Science* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 57.

[10] J. Chapman, 'The Feminist Perspective', in David Marsh and Gerry Stoker, eds, *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, 2nd edn. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

[11] E. Tucker, 'Feminist Political Theory', in Michael T Gibbons et al., eds, *The Encyclopaedia of Political Thought* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2014), pp. 1033–36, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118474396.

[12] L. Disch and M. Hawkesworth, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 2, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199328581.001.0001.

exercised, and what are its consequences. Feminist approaches in this context are concerned with the ways power relations are gender: they reproduce gender norms and biases and create gendered hierarchies. Feminist political analysis methodically examines the interconnections between the state, its policies, and the social construction of identities of women and men. It aims to understand state actions through a gender lens.[13]

## WHEN FEMINIST POLITICAL ANALYSIS MEETS NEW INSTITUTIONALISM

'Does institutionalism need a concept of gender? And does feminism need institutions? […] How does the incorporation of a feminist perspective change institutional approaches to the study of politics?', asks Joni Lovenduski[14] in a foreword to *Gender, Politics and Institutions: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism.*[15]

Does new institutionalism need a distinct, feminist branch? There are three 'mainstream' new institutionalisms: rational choice institutionalism (RCI), sociological institutionalism (SI), and historical institutionalism (HI). However, these are not the only strands of new institutionalism as researchers have also engaged in development of branches such as network institutionalism, constructivist/discursive institutionalism, and feminist institutionalism.[16] What is more, further fragmentation resulted in endeavours to create even more specific theoretical frameworks such as feminist discursive institutionalism,[17] feminist historical institutionalism,[18] or feminist rational choice institutionalism.[19]

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[13] J. Kantola and E. Lombardo, 'Feminist Political Analysis: Exploring Strengths, Hegemonies and Limitations', *Feminist Theory* 18: 3, 2017, pp. 323–41, https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700117721882; A. Gale Mazur and S. Hoard, 'Gendering Comparative Policy Studies: Towards Better Science', *Comparative Policy Studies*, 2014, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137314154.

[14] J. Lovenduski, 'Foreword', in Mona Lena Krook and Fiona Mackay, eds, *Gender, Politics and Institutions: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. vii.

[15] M.L. Krook and F. Mackay, eds, *Gender, Politics and Institutions: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[16] Vide: Lowndes and Roberts, *Why Institutions Matter*, p. 31.

[17] Vide: T. Kulawik, 'Staking the Frame of a Feminist Discursive Institutionalism', *Politics and Gender* 5: 2, 2009, pp. 262–71, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X0900021X; C. Bacchi and M. Rönnblom, 'Feminist Discursive Institutionalism: A Poststructural Alternative', *NORA. Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 22: 3, 2014, pp. 170––86, https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2013.864701.

[18] G. Waylen, 'What Can Historical Institutionalism Offer Feminist Institutionalists?', *Politics and Gender* 5: 2, 2009, pp. 245–53, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X09000191.

[19] A. Driscoll and M.L. Krook, 'Can There Be a Feminist Rational Choice Institutionalism?', *Politics and Gender* 5: 2, 2009, pp. 238–45, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X0900018X.

Feminist scholars claim that the concept of gender is virtually absent from mainstream new institutional research. 'The proponents of feminist and institutionalist political science share a desire to answer real-world questions. But the shared interest in how institutions work in general has not to date extended to a common interest in how that working is gendered', notes Lovenduski.[20] Likewise, Kantola and Waylen maintain that before the introduction of its feminist strand, new institutionalism was 'largely gender-blind'.[21]

One of the claims of feminist social science is that political institutions are gender regimes:[22] rules about gender inherently structure political institutions while actors within institutions observe, make, and follow those rules. Gender in such a context is a process 'manifested as the differential effects of apparently gender-neutral structures and policies upon women and men, and upon masculine and/or feminine actors'.[23] Institutions also produce gendered effects and outcomes: the different ways in which gender relations and hierarchies are institutionalized within political systems, e.g. in forms of employment, taxation, social or parental policies.[24] Feminist scholars seek to uncover gendered rules and practices, especially those discriminatory and exclusionary, to pave the way for more gender-just institutions.[25] Institutional analysis is concerned with institutional change. Feminist institutionalists demonstrate that gendered power relations and inequalities, their endurance or transformation, are likely to be the source of institutional change or continuity, either internally or externally generated.

Feminist institutionalism has a lot in common with sociological institutionalism. They both focus on the social construction of norms and practices, on the interplay between formal and informal

[20] Lovenduski, 'Foreword', p. ix.

[21] J. Kantola, and G. Waylen, 'Analysing Legislatures Using a Feminist Institutionalist Lens', *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 2024, p. 3, https://doi.org/10.1332/251510088Y2024D000000048.

[22] S. Walby, 'The European Union and Gender Equality: Emergent Varieties of Gender Regime', *Social Politics* 11: 1, 2004, pp. 4–29, 145, https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxh024; idem, 'Varieties of Gender Regimes', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 27: 3, 2020, pp. 414–31, https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaa018.

[23] K. Beckwith, 'A Common Language of Gender?', *Politics & Gender* 1: 01, 2005, p. 132, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X05211017.

[24] Walby, 'Varieties of Gender Regimes'; Lowndes, 'How Are Political Institutions Gendered?', pp. 545–47; T. Verge, 'The Gender Regime of Political Parties: Feedback Effects between Supply and Demand', *Politics and Gender* 11: 4, 2015, pp. 754–59, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X15000483.

[25] Lowndes, 'How Are Things Done Around Here? Uncovering Institutional Rules and Their Gendered Effects'.

rules, and on the embeddedness of institutional processes in norms, cognitive frames, and wider cultural contexts. They adapt a concept of context-bounded rationality, where individual and group interests and norms are formed around the social context.[26] However, distinguishing characteristic of feminist institutionalism is that it understands gender as constitutive for processes, practices, norms, ideologies, and distribution of power in institutions.[27] As for 'the logic of appropriateness' (according to which institutions discourage particular types of behaviour and support others), feminist institutional scholars argue that 'institutional norms prescribe (as well as proscribe) 'acceptable' masculine and feminine forms of behaviour, rules, and values for men and women within institutions' and therefore stress 'the importance of uncovering the gendered nature of the logic of appropriateness within institutions across time and place'.[28] In more practical terms, 'without the integration of gendered perspectives, SI [sociological institutionalism] cannot answer the question of why it appears to be more difficult to institutionalize gender equality reforms and norms than other sorts of innovations'.[29]

## FEMINIST INSTITUTIONALISM: THE *GENDERED* ORGANIZATION OF POLITICAL LIFE

### GENDER AND POLITICAL ACTORS

March and Olsen laid the groundwork for new institutionalism when they famously stated that 'the organization of political life makes a difference'.[30] Feminist institutional scholars consequently asked 'how the *gendered* organization of political life makes a difference'.[31] To speak about *gendered* institutions, we need first to define what the term *gender* means. A definition of gender particularly useful for

[26] F. Mackay, S. Monro, and G. Waylen, 'The Feminist Potential of Sociological Institutionalism', *Politics and Gender* 5: 2, 2009, pp. 253–62, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X09000208.

[27] J. Acker, 'From Sex Roles to Gendered Institutions', *Contemporary Sociology* 21: 5, 1992, pp. 565–69.

[28] L. Chappell, 'Comparing Political Institutions: Revealing the Gendered "Logic of Appropriateness"', *Politics & Gender* 2: 02, 2006, p. 226, https://doi.org/10.1017/s1743923x06211048.

[29] Mackay, Monro, and Waylen, 'The Feminist Potential of Sociological Institutionalism', p. 259.

[30] March and Olsen, 'The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life', p. 747.

[31] Lowndes, 'How Are Things Done Around Here? Uncovering Institutional Rules and Their Gendered Effects'.

political scientists and provided by Joan Scott[32] will be adopted for the needs of this essay. According to Scott, gender is 'a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power'.[33] Importantly, gender has a profound influence on the manner in which individuals perceive the world, society, politics and power. Gender-based inequalities are intertwined in the very fabric of political study and practice.[34]

Feminist institutionalists posit that constructs of masculinity and femininity are embedded in the prevailing cultural and cognitive frameworks of political institutions and that gendered practices exert influence on power relations within institutions.[35] They argue that institutional scholars should not investigate formal and informal institutions in strict separation, but rather research the specific interplay between informal and formal rules and their impact on women's and men's participation in politics.[36] Informal institutions may reinforce change if tight coupling between old informal practices and new formal institutions occurs but they could also have an opposite effect if they contradict or exist in parallel to formal rules, reincorporate old ways and conserve power relationships.[37]

## HIDDEN LIFE OF INSTITUTIONS

Feminist institutionalism focuses on the interplay between formal and informal institutions and the gendered character of institutions. Its proponents assume that a thorough institutional analysis calls for scrupulous examination of both formal and informal institutions.

[32] J.W. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *The American Historical Review* 91: 5, 1986, pp. 1053–75, https://doi.org/10.2307/1864376.

[33] Ibid., p. 1067.

[34] G. Waylen et al., 'Introduction: Gender and Politics: A Gendered World, a Gendered Discipline', *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, May 2013, pp. 1–31, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199751457.013.0034.

[35] Acker, 'From Sex Roles to Gendered Institutions'; Lowndes, 'How Are Things Done Around Here? Uncovering Institutional Rules and Their Gendered Effects'.

[36] E. Bjarnegård and Meryl Kenny, 'Revealing the Secret Garden: The Informal Dimensions of Political Recruitment', *Politics and Gender* 11: 4, 2015, pp. 748–53, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X15000471.

[37] S. Leach and V. Lowndes, 'Of Roles and Rules: Analysing the Changing Relationship between Political Leaders and Chief Executives in Local Government', *Public Policy and Administration* 22: 2, 2007, pp. 183–200, https://doi.org/10.1177/0952076707075892; Fiona Mackay, Meryl Kenny, and Louise Chappell, 'New Institutionalism through a Gender Lens: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism?', *International Political Science Review* 31: 5, 2010, pp. 573–88, https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512110388788.

Political actors' actions are guided by a mix of formal and informal constraints and incentives. Informal practices can reinforce but also sabotage formal rules.

The character of interaction between formal and informal institutions depends on several factors. Firstly, whether informal practices produce outcomes similar (convergent) or different (divergent) with outcomes of adherence to formal rules. Secondly, whether existing relevant formal institutions effectively constraint or enable political behaviour. If effects of formal and informal institutions are convergent and formal institutions are effective, informal institutions are *complementary*: they boost efficiency of formal rules. If formal practices are effective, but outcomes are different than of informal practices, informal institutions are *accommodating*: 'they create incentives to behave in ways that alter the substantive effects of formal rules, but without directly violating them; they contradict the spirit, but not the letter, of the formal rules'.[38] When outcomes are convergent, but formal institutions lack efficiency, informal institutions are *substitutive*: they support attaining goals that formal institutions aimed for, yet failed. Finally, informal institutions can be *competing* (formal institutions are effective, but outcomes are divergent): they compete with formal rules and to follow informal rules, actor have to violate formal regulations (e.g. clientelism, patrimonialism, corruption).[39]

It is relatively easy to identify formal institutions. What constitutes an informal institution is a more labyrinthine question. Informal conventions, practices, and norms are usually less apparent and immediately detectable than formal, written rules. They might be easily overseen due to obscurity or unrecognized as they are implied and tacit. They often seem natural and are taken for granted. Informal practices constitute a *hidden life*,[40] a *secret garden*,[41] or a *black box* [42] of different aspects of political life.

Feminist institutionalists follow Elinor Ostrom's recommendation to 'stress the concept of rules-in-use rather than focusing on rules-in-

[38] Helmke and Levitsky, 'Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda', p. 729.

[39] Ibid., pp. 728–30.

[40] L. Chappell and G. Waylen, 'Gender and the Hidden Life of Institutions', *Public Administration* 91: 3, 2013, pp. 599–615, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2012. 02104.x.

[41] Bjarnegård and Kenny, 'Revealing the Secret Garden: The Informal Dimensions of Political Recruitment'.

[42] M. Kenny and T. Verge, 'Opening Up the Black Box: Gender and Candidate Selection in a New Era', *Government and Opposition* 51: 3, 2016, pp. 351–69, https://doi.org/10. 1017/gov.2016.5.

-form' where rules-in-use are understood as 'the dos and don'ts that one learns on the ground that may not exist in any written document'.[43] By uncovering these often ostensibly invisible informal rules of the candidate recruitment in politics, researchers attempt to shed light on 'secret gardens' of politics: who and why is considered a suitable candidate, why women more often than men run from 'no-hope' seats, how formal gender equality reforms (e.g. quotas) are circumvented by informal arrangements.[44]

## BRINGING THE GENDERED CHARACTER OF INSTITUTIONS OUT OF THE DARKNESS: EXAMPLES OF EMPIRICAL APPLICATIONS OF FEMINIST INSTITUTIONALISM

Feminist institutionalist scholars reconceptualization of parliamentary assemblies as gendered spaces has been a key innovation in legislative studies. Sonia Palmieri described parliaments as 'workplaces with their own culture, set of rituals and practices, and hours of operations', sites 'of gender contestation, a place where masculinities and femininities are constructed and legitimised in the process of normalising rituals, rules and procedures', and 'institutions saturated in gendered expectations, norms, rules and practices that traditionally conferred power on men'.[45]

Proponents of feminist institutionalism strive to include the influence of gender on operation and effects of institutions in new institutionalist research agenda.

### RECRUITMENT

Kenny and Verge[46] have highlighted that parties are the essential gatekeepers on a way to parliamentary mandates, exercising a nearly exclusive control over the selection and recruitment of candidates. At the same time, political recruitment is a particularly obscure process, based

[43] E. Ostrom, 'Institutional Rational Choice', in Paul Sabatier, ed., *Theories of the Policy Process*, 1st edn. (Routledge, 2019), p. 23, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367274689-2.

[44] Bjarnegård and Kenny, 'Revealing the Secret Garden: The Informal Dimensions of Political Recruitment'.

[45] S. Palmieri, 'Feminist Institutionalism and Gender-Sensitive Parliaments: Relating Theory and Practice', pp. 173–75, in Marian Sawer and Kerryn Baker, eds, *Gender Innovation in Political Science* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), pp. 173–94, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75850-3_9.

[46] M. Kenny and T. Verge, 'Opening Up the Black Box: Gender and Candidate Selection in a New Era', *Government and Opposition* 51: 3, 2016, p. 352, https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2016.5.

largely on informal practices. Candidate selection has been famously characterised by Gallagher and Marsh as 'the secret garden of politics'.[47]

Feminist institutionalism postulates to open up this 'secret garden', 'black box', or 'shadowy pathways' of candidate selection: 'to identify and empirically investigate the ways in which parties facilitate or block women's access to political office'[48] through formal, but mostly informal, practices. Political parties are responsible for recruiting candidates for parliamentarians, constructing, and shaping electoral lists, and promoting candidates. At the same time, political parties have been predominantly male-dominated historically, and consequently are often marked by—frequently unacknowledged——traditional perceptions of gender relations that might (although it is not a universal principle) disadvantage women's electoral opportunities.[49] Women candidates for parliamentary mandates and women MPs often struggle to fit into these 'rules of the game' set by men. Puwar, who researched British women parliamentarians, states that they had to manage their feminity: '[w]hilst adhering to the social rules of femininity, at the same time, they have to make sure that they are not too feminine'.[50] Such informal practices play large role in deciding who is considered a suitable candidate for a parliamentary seat.

Important component of the secret garden of political recruitment are informal networks. Women often lack access to such men--dominated networks. At the same time, contacts within such networks are pivotal for obtaining campaign financing and winnable positions on electoral lists.[51] Importantly, informal practices can also play against men, as evidenced by Piscopo.[52] Piscopo explored the case of Mexico, where female party members and women legislators built their own informal networks and practices. They effectively collaborated across parties to ensure that women were given satisfactory positions on electoral lists.[53]

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[47] M. Gallagher and M. Marsh, *Candidate Selection in Comparative Perspective: The Secret Garden of Politics* (London: Sage Publications, 1988).

[48] Kenny and Verge, 'Opening Up the Black Box: Gender and Candidate Selection in a New Era', p. 363.

[49] Ibid.

[50] N. Puwar, 'Thinking About Making a Difference', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6: 1, 2004, p. 75, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2004.00127.x.

[51] M. Kenny, *Gender and Political Recruitment* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), p. 22, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137271945.

[52] J.M. Piscopo, 'When Informality Advantages Women: Quota Networks, Electoral Rules and Candidate Selection in Mexico', *Government and Opposition* 51: 3, 2016, pp. 487–512, https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2016.11.

[53] Ibid.

QUOTAS

In order to counteract women's political underrepresentation, many countries around the world adopted gender quotas. Quotas are 'constitutional provisions or national laws that require political parties participating in legislative elections to include women on party ballots'.[54] While quotas are sometimes described as a 'fast track' tool for boosting women's political representation, their actual effectiveness has been disputable.[55]

Feminist institutionalist approach highlights the role of informal practices of subverting or circumventing quota regulations such as running women in 'no-hope' seats. As Kenny and Verge[56] note, political parties have developed 'expertise in exploiting the legal loopholes of electoral and quota rules.' Franceschet and Piscopo[57] examined the persistence of gendered hierarchies and gendered power network which govern political advancement in Argentina regardless of the introduction of the formal institution of national-level quota in 1991. They discovered that while quotas have considerably enhanced women's access to elected office, informal institutions such as the gendered division of labour in the public and private spheres accounted for enduring male dominance in the more desired and high-status political offices. Argentinian women's traditional domestic responsibilities constrained their political careers which, according to Franceschet and Piscopo's findings, was exemplified by differing men's and women's family patterns and women's tendency to occupy local offices close to home. The higher value assigned to masculinity constitutes another informal practice because it 'means that women must often possess greater credentials than their male competitors to compensate for any perceived weaknesses associated with their sex', as evidenced by 'party leaders' preferences for men in women's higher education credentials and in women's less frequent ascension to the top list positions'.[58]

[54] L.A. Schwindt-Bayer, 'Making Quotas Work: The Effect of Gender Quota Laws On the Election of Women', *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 34; 1, 2009, p. 6, https://doi.org/10.3162/036298009787500330; Drude Dahlerup, ed., *Women, Quotas and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2013), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203099544.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Kenny and Verge, 'Opening Up the Black Box: Gender and Candidate Selection in a New Era'.

[57] S. Franceschet and J. M. Piscopo, 'Sustaining Gendered Practices? Power, Parties, and Elite Political Networks in Argentina', *Comparative Political Studies* 47: 1, 2014, pp. 85–110, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414013489379.

[58] Franceschet and Piscopo, p. 105.

## FEMINIST INSTITUTIONALISM AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are representatives of nearly 450 million EU citizens. The EP is widely regarded as a proponent of gender equality in Europe, owing to its pronounced advocacy for women's rights and its relatively equal representation of women and men among parliamentarians. When measured against the aggregate average of the Member States, the proportion of women in the European Parliament since the inaugural EP elections in 1979 has consistently exceeded the share of women parliamentarians in the national lower houses.[59] The high—compared to other assemblies——proportion of women MEPs has been suggested to be a factor of EP's consistent role as a promoter of gender equality.[60]

At the same time, the EP has been dubbed as a 'contradictory forerunner' of gender equality by Kantola and Lombardo.[61] They remark that while there is '[t]he wide array of formal institutional arrangements for the advancement of gender equality provides a positive picture of the European Parliament as a gender equality actor and a success story for feminist governance', simultaneously 'there are a number of informal practices in the parliament that have the potential to undermine the good formal practices and institutions for feminist governance'.[62] Recently, the European Research Council--funded *EUGenDem* project[63] investigated gendered differences in two key institutional arenas within the EP, namely political groups and committees. The EUGenDEM research was informed by feminist institutionalism and built on previous body of work using this theoretical framework.[64]

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[59] J. Fortin-Rittberger and B. Rittberger, 'Do Electoral Rules Matter? Explaining National Differences in Women's Representation in the European Parliament', *European Union Politics* 15: 4, 2014, p. 498, https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116514527179.

[60] J.M. van der Vleuten, 'The European Parliament as a Constant Promoter of Gender Equality: Another European Myth?', in Petra Ahrens and Lise Rolandsen Agustín, eds, *Gendering the European Parliament: Structures, Policies and Practices* (European Conference on Politics and Gender, Colchester: ECPR Press, 2019).

[61] J. Kantola and E. Lombardo, 'The European Parliament as a Gender Equality Actor: A Contradictory Forerunner', in *Handbook of Feminist Governance* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), pp. 299–310, https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap-oa/book/9781800374812/book-part-9781800374812-33.xml.

[62] Kantola and Lombardo, p. 299.

[63] https://blogs.helsinki.fi/eugendem-project/.

[64] Kantola and Waylen, 'Analysing Legislatures Using a Feminist Institutionalist Lens'.

## GENDERED PRACTICES AND DIVISION OF LABOUR

Kantola and Lombardo state that 'the European Parliament enacts a variety of informal gendered political practices in the institution as a whole and in European Parliament's political parties and political groups'.[65] Firstly, a gendered division of labour persists in the EP. It is rooted in a combination of seniority and gender stereotyping. Such stereotypes assign women parliamentarians with areas that are perceived as 'soft' and less prestigious, e.g. family, social affairs, education. The distribution of MEPs within the EP committees suggests that men are overrepresented in domains such as foreign affairs, economy, or finance. Polak showed that gendered division of positions within the EP is also connected to the prestige assigned to various EP committees. Among the five committees considered as the most prestigious and coveted: Foreign Affairs; Industry, Research and Energy; Economic and Monetary Affairs; Environment, Public Health and Food Safety; Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs[66]—only in one (Economic and Monetary Affairs) the chair is a woman, and in as many as three of them in the five-person presidium (the chair plus four vice-chairs) there is only one woman (20%).[67]

European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality's, i.e. the FEMM committee, is responsible for highlighting gender equality issues and monitoring gender mainstreaming. The FEMM committee is considered to be a catalyst of the integration of gender equality into EP's work.[68] Ahrens[69] examined the FEMM Committee's activity through feminist institutionalist lens. Through qualitative interviews with FEMM Committee members, she explored ways in which the FEMM Committee employs formal rules of the EP as well as informal practices to expand its influence, turning its formal institutional disadvantages (e.g. the weak position within EP's structure) into strategic advantages by applying the gendered 'logic of appropriateness' to navigate the institutional power play.[70]

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[65] Eidem, 'The European Parliament as a Gender Equality Actor: A Contradictory Forerunner', p. 304.

[66] Order after Richard Whitaker, 'A Case of "You Can Always Get What You Want"? Committee Assignments in the European Parliament', *Parliamentary Affairs* 72: 1, 2019, pp. 62–81, https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsy010.

[67] Polak, 'Parlament Europejski w awangardzie politycznego równouprawnienia kobiet?'

[68] Kantola and Lombardo, 'The European Parliament as a Gender Equality Actor: A Contradictory Forerunner'.

[69] P. Ahrens, 'The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality in the European Parliament: Taking Advantage of Institutional Power Play', *Parliamentary Affairs* 69: 4, 2016, pp. 778–93, https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsw005.

[70] Ibid., p. 790.

## POLITICAL CULTURE

Another area where feminist institutional analysis has been applied is the genderedness of European Parliament's political culture. According to Kantola and Lombardo,[71] gendered practices in the EP include 'recruitment and promotion of staff, work–family arrangements and anti-harassment policies, […] long-working-hours culture, hyper--masculine political performance, surveillance of women MEPs and 'burden of doubt' about their competencies.'[72]

Kantola and Rolandsen Agustín[73] examined women MEPs perceptions of gender equality in the EP's party groups. Their study is grounded in a discursive-political examination of interviews with 18 Danish and Finnish women MEPs. They found that European Parliament's party groups display both common and diverging dimensions of gendered practices, such as stereotypes regarding prestige of particular policy domains and expertise within these domains or which competences are appreciated and conducive to achieving positions of power and advancing political career. They also discovered informal practices of women, such as informal networks of women MEP's (both intra-and cross-party).

Berthet and Kantola[74] employed a feminist institutional analysis to analyse the discursive contestations surrounding the problem of sexual harassment in the EP. Their study investigated how the central actors in the EP comprehended sexual harassment and how these conceptualisations influenced the proposed remedies. They identified different framings of sexual harassment and different solutions proposed by MEPs. Some MEPs constructed sexual harassment as a *private or cultural problem*—a private issue that required modifying individual mindsets and behavioural patterns instead of seeking to reform institutions underpinning such behaviours. Another group of MEPs assured that *the EP as a good institution*, determining that the current institutional practices are adequate to address issues of

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[71] Kantola and Lombardo, 'The European Parliament as a Gender Equality Actor: A Contradictory Forerunner'.

[72] Ibid., p. 305.

[73] J. Kantola and L. Rolandsen Agustín, 'Gendering the Representative Work of the European Parliament: A Political Analysis of Women MEP's Perceptions of Gender Equality in Party Groups', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 57: 4, 2019, pp. 768–86, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12885.

[74] V. Berthet and J. Kantola, 'Gender, Violence, and Political Institutions: Struggles over Sexual Harassment in the European Parliament', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 28: 1, 2021, pp. 143–67, https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaa015.

sexual harassment. Others understood it as *abuse of gendered power* and proposed 'to enact new rules which carved space for progressive institutional change'.[75]

Finally, EP staff that started the #MeTooEP campaign against sexual harassment in the institution promoted a discourse that described sexual harassment victims as *harassed workers* and postulated 'meaningful reforms of both formal institutions (changes in rules and procedures) and informal institutions (norms and culture)'.[76] The analysis demonstrated that even within the ostensibly women--friendly institution of the EP, sexual harassment and responses to sexual harassment constitute a controversial and divisive issue.

## FEMINIST INSTITUTIONALISM AND QUANTITATIVE METHODOLOGIES: FRIENDS OR FOES? STATISTICAL GENDER ANALYSIS OF THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

Feminist political analysis has embraced both quantitative and qualitative methods. However, many feminist scholars rejected quantitative methodology, questioning its underlying positivists assumption and the suitability of its application to feminist studies. Stauffer and O'Brien mention that

> [s]ome feminists have challenged the positivist assertion that there is a knowable truth that can be assessed through empirical evidence. They argue that the statistics as hard facts' mentality is fundamentally flawed. […] A cornerstone of feminism as methodology is the understanding that the research process itself is shaped by gendered norms and practices'.[77]

Yet, other scholars argue that quantitative methods can be employed while at the same time renouncing the concept of an achievable universal 'truth'. While feminist institutionalist scholars predominantly use qualitative methods such as institutional ethnography, participant observation, and in-depth interviews,[78] quantitative research can also be conducive and fruitful.

[75] Ibid., p. 3.
[76] Ibid., p. 17–18.
[77] K.E. Stauffer and D.Z. O'Brien, 'Quantitative Methods and Feminist Political Science', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 5, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.210.
[78] Kantola and Waylen, 'Analysing Legislatures Using a Feminist Institutionalist Lens'; vide: Valentine Berthet et al., *Guide to Qualitative Research in Parliaments* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-39808-7.

Large-scale quantitative and comparative studies can help to identify patterns and build a theory[79]. Weldon suggests that 'large--scale cross-national analyses, can be fruitfully employed by feminists', as they 'offer the opportunity to examine our ideas about institutions in ways that are not possible in smaller, localized studies'.[80] Statistical analysis offers important advantages such as summarizing voluminous amounts of information, which would otherwise be difficult to synthesise, estimating the extent to which examined relationships is attributable to chance, or a greater (compared to qualitative research) capacity to denaturalize local social practices related to, e.g. historical male dominance, and to examine of the importance of macrolevel institutional and societal factors and their interrelationships.[81]

As for empirical applications, feminist institutional approach and quantitative methods has been employed to examine the process of recruitment and electoral opportunities of women candidates for a position of a Member of the European Parliament. Polak and Lewandowski ground their hypotheses in feminist institutional theory yet employ large-N cross-national quantitative analysis to determine key factors contributing to the election of women to the European Parliament.[82] They analysed the data coming from elections to the EP in 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019 in all EU Member States. The analysis revealed that party characteristics, including party ideology, party's stance on European integration, party size, but also incumbency levels, are pivotal in shaping the electoral prospects of female candidates. Formal institutional regulations, such as national legislated quotas, are not significantly related to women's representation in the EP. They also found divergent patterns of CEE and Western EU Member States. The results show that:

> [i]nformal practices and informal forms of power, such as political capital possessed by incumbents, turn out to be much more important. Different patterns identified in CEE and Western Member States are also likely due to Ostrom's rules-in-use rather than rules-in-form'.[83]

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[79] L. Chappell, 'Comparing Political Institutions: Revealing the Gendered "Logic of Appropriateness"', *Politics & Gender* 2: 2, 2006, pp. 223–35, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X06221044.

[80] S. Laurel Weldon, 'Using Statistical Methods to Study Institutions', *Politics & Gender* 10: 4, 2014, p. 661, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X14000464.

[81] Ibid., p. 664.

[82] A. Polak and M. Lewandowski, 'Institutions or Ideology? Cross-Party and Cross-Country Analysis of Factors Contributing to the Election of Women to the European Parliament', *European Political Science Review* 17: 2, 2025, pp. 338–57, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773924000286.

[83] Polak and Lewandowski, 'Institutions or Ideology?'

Similarly, Polak quantitatively analysing the composition of electoral lists and juxtaposing them with political parties' characteristics, demonstrates that women candidates' sever underrepresentation in the most electorally viable list positions and overrepresentation in the positions that are in practice unwinnable constitutes the main reason of the persisting underrepresentation of women among the Polish MEPs.[84] The study furthermore shows that while the introduction of electoral gender quotas in Poland in 2011 was successful in increasing the overall percentage of women on electoral lists, the increase was not evenly distributed across electoral lists—it exacerbated the overrepresentation of women candidates in the most unviable positions.[85] This research supports the existence of a mechanism of circumventing the quotas and giving women no-hope seats, widely discussed by feminist institutionalists.[86] Kenny and Verge[87] note that:

> [i]n cases of quotas that do not have placement mandates, parties typically place women in hopeless seats or list positions, keeping the lion's share of safe seats and winnable positions for male incumbents or male newcomers, which erodes the transformative potential of gender quotas.

## CONCLUSION: PAVING THE WAY TOWARDS MORE GENDER-JUST INSTITUTIONS

Gender is implicated in institutions in two ways: nominally, through 'gender capture', predominantly the capture of institutions by men, but also substantively, by means of social norm concerning prevailing ideas about masculinity and feminity which bring about mechanisms of institutional gender bias.[88]

Feminist political scientists have actively engaged with new institutionalism, recognising the strength and potential of it concepts and tools for examining issues essential for feminist scholarship. Yet, on the other hand, they have also revealed the gender-blindness of mainstream strands of new institutionalism

[84] A. Polak, 'Gender Quotas and Women's Access to Viable List Positions: Evidence from the European Parliament Elections in Poland', in press, to be published in *Politics in Central Europe*, 22: 1 (March 2026 issue).

[85] Polak, 'Gender Quotas and Women's Access to Viable List Positions: Evidence from the European Parliament Elections in Poland'.

[86] Bjarnegård and Kenny, 'Revealing the "Secret Garden"'.

[87] Kenny and Verge, 'Opening Up the Black Box', p. 363.

[88] G. Waylen, 'Gendering Institutional Change', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.237.

expressed in the assumption that institutions are gender-neutral. Feminist institutionalism argues that 'constructions of masculinity and femininity are intertwined in the daily culture or logic of political institutions, rather than existing out in society or fixed within individuals which they then bring whole to the institution', and '[w]hile constructions of masculinity and femininity are both present in political institutions, the masculine ideal underpins institutional structures, practices, discourses, and norms.[89]

Even though the feminist variant of new institutionalism is still in early stages of development, it has already enlarged the existing knowledge about the gender dynamics of institutions. This article highlighted a potential for broadening methodologies of feminist institutionalism and developing more quantitative studies within this framework. Feminist institutionalism carries potential not only for contributing to a better understanding of sources of power inequalities in political and public arena, mechanisms of institutional reproduction of inequalities, catalysts for institutional change, and institutional dynamics, but also to support a more practical quest of feminist scholarship by answering the question of what role institutions can play to promote gender equality.

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[89] M.L. Krook and F. Mackay, 'Introduction: Gender, Politics, and Institutions', in eidem, eds, *Gender, Politics and Institutions: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 6.

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