

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

# Bridging Attribute and Process: Reflections on Founding *Politics & Gender*

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We are delighted to celebrate the 20th anniversary of *Politics & Gender*. This achievement signals an inflection point in the maturity of the subfield of women, gender, and politics research, and provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the role that the journal has played in the discipline of political science.

*Politics & Gender* (P&G) is the official journal of the Women, Gender & Politics Research organized section of the American Political Science Association. The section owns the journal, selects the editors, and oversees its operations through a presentation to section members at the annual meeting. In the many years that preceded the publication of the journal, the organized section had provided an important place for scholars to connect with one another by organizing panels at the annual conference, creating networks of scholars, and recognizing excellent work through awards. Former leaders of the section — including Sylvia Bashevkin, Susan Carroll, and Pippa Norris — decided that the creation of an official journal would strengthen the subfield and further legitimize it.

Twenty years of P&G means 20 volumes, 76 issues, and over a thousand articles, a level of accomplishment that we could not imagine when we took on the role of founding editors in 2004. We are humbled to have played a part in the journal's 20-year and counting run. In this article, we review the intellectual vision that guided us as we took on the tasks of assembling an editorial board, soliciting submissions, and choosing a cover design. How did we think about what it means to use gender as a concept for analysis in political science, and how did the articles that we published illustrate and inform that vision? Our analysis focuses on the two conceptions of gender that predominate in political science scholarship — gender as individual attribute and gender as process — and the relationship between them. We conclude with a call to gender and politics

scholars to continue to be methodologically thoughtful about the ways they employ the concept of gender in their research.

### **The Politics — and the Political Science — Come First**

We named the journal *Politics & Gender* — as opposed to *Gender & Politics* — to emphasize our conviction that the politics — and the political science — always come first. Other, earlier social science journals focusing on gender were, of course, products of their disciplines (e.g., the sociology journal *Gender and Society*), but our goal was to emphasize the political explicitly, undergirding the importance and power of states, governments, and politics, broadly understood, in defining and shaping gender. We prioritized work that focused on the state, the core concept that distinguishes political science from the other social sciences. For us, this meant three types of work: analysis of institutions of the state (the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, for example); exploration of the ways that state actors and policies draw and maintain distinctions between public and private; and consideration of how such distinctions serve to create and sustain gendered relations of power. We wanted to underscore the importance and power of the state, in scholarship and in actual politics. We welcomed research that employed conventional and/or innovative definitions of what counted as political and relied on established and/or cutting-edge political science methodology. Overall, for *P&G*, a major commitment at the founding of the journal was to privilege the political, broadly understood, and to publish research that demonstrated how the political is gendered.

We sought as well to welcome research that challenged the state and espoused more critical approaches. Research in women and politics grew out of the feminist movement and continues to draw upon insights from feminist theory. As we put it in the first issue of *P&G*, the field reflects political “commitment[s] — born out of politics of the US Black, Chicano, and Native American liberation movements and the early struggles of second-wave feminism and informed by feminist theoretical critiques by women of color” (Beckwith and Baldez 2005, 3). To that end, we highlighted research that reflects anti-state perspectives and embraces autonomous feminism. We continue to acknowledge that *P&G* emerged out of feminist commitments that are critical of political science, at the same time that we envisioned the journal as an outlet that operates within the discipline.

One of our main goals in taking on the responsibility of founding a new journal was to publish the very best work across the subfields of political science that focused on gender and politics, and to demonstrate the centrality of gender across politics. The fact that gender and politics scholarship traverses every other subfield in the discipline makes it distinctive. As we put it in the inaugural issue, “gender cuts through every aspect of politics” (Beckwith and Baldez 2005). In her contribution to that issue, Mala Htun (2005, 162) stated this point even more forcefully: “it is ontologically impossible *not* to have a gender perspective: It is implicit in all domains of academic inquiry.”

A bit of history is in order here. *P&G* is 20 years old, but the subfield of women and politics predates it by three decades or more. *Women & Politics*, founded

in 1980, was the first political science journal with a specific focus on women. For the most part, it published work that focused primarily on women in terms of behaviors, viewpoints, and movements, but was not yet explicit about gender as a category of analysis. *Women & Politics* became the *Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy* in 2005. As early as 1987, new journals such as *Gender & Society* emerged with the goal of publishing works using gender — not just women — as a category of analysis and where “gender categories themselves [were] questioned” (Lorber 1987, 3). As we explain below, these studies went beyond women’s behavior to provide critical analysis of gender identities and processes. The *International Feminist Journal of Politics* was created in 1999 to create “a visible and vocal feminist space in international studies” and to publish research on international topics that embraced a critical view of mainstream politics and political science (Youngs, Jones, and Pettman 1999, 1). The journal *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State, and Society*, founded in 1993, focuses on “gendered politics and policies in a global context” (About the Journal 2024). Gender and politics scholars also had, and still have, the option of submitting work to *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, an interdisciplinary women’s studies journal. What was missing was a journal that fit squarely within political science in terms of questions and key concepts. The fact that scholars submitted 150 manuscripts for consideration in our first year validated the intuition that the new journal filled an important need.

### **Gender as a Category of Analysis in Political Science: Is Gender an Individual Attribute, a Feature of Institutions, or Both?**

As editors, one of our fundamental intellectual goals in founding the journal was to advance understanding of what it means to use gender for purposes of analysis in political science. We found that when political scientists employ gender as a category of analysis, they are typically operating under one of two perspectives about how to conceptualize gender (and sometimes both). The most commonly held perspective treats gender as an individual-level attribute, that individuals present or that is ascribed to them, primarily but not exclusively defined as a woman-man binary. The second way that scholars conceive of gender is as a feature of institutions or a process by which institutions, policies, and politics become freighted with and also produce meanings about masculinities and femininities that are linked to relations of domination and subordination. Gender as an institutional process constructs understandings of gender at the individual level, with dicta about how persons should behave, how they should present themselves in public, and the range of opportunities and constraints to which they would be subject. Below we illustrate what each concept entails, and we assess their strengths and limitations.

#### **Gender as Individual Attribute**

Most political scientists who incorporate gender into their research continue to employ gender in terms of an individual attribute, treating gender as a

dichotomous, binary division between men and women. For this body of research, gender is often operationally synonymous with “women” and “accepts the existence of women as an established social category” (Beckwith and Baldez 2005, 2). And indeed, research on women continues to be a central component of the work done in the subfield of gender and politics. We emphatically assert the importance of continuing to publish research that focuses on women, even as we advocate for expanding the space for research on gender.

Reliance on a gender binary is not essential to the concept of gender as individual attribute. The view of gender as an aspect of individual identity also serves as the foundation for research on gender identities that are plural, fluid, and transcend the binary. Studies that examine the political participation of LGBTQ+ persons, or public opinion about policies affecting LGBTQ+ persons, for example, start from the assumption that gender is an attribute of individuals.

Intersectionality, which highlights the ways in which multiple politically relevant attributes overlap, can also reflect this perspective. As Laurel Weldon (2006, 235) writes, “In order to illuminate the various ways that women and men are advantaged and disadvantaged *as women and men*, gender analysis must incorporate analysis of race, class, sexuality, and other axes of disadvantage, and explore interactions among them.” What’s key for the individual attribute conception of gender is that it takes a person’s identity as a starting point.

A vast literature concurs on the need for intersectional approaches (Beltrán 2013; Duong 2012; Hancock 2007; Hirschmann 2012; Smooth 2006; Strolovitch 2012; Townsend-Bell 2014). Nonetheless, our experience as the founding editors suggests that work that rests on truly intersectional definitions of gender remains rare. This is in part an artifact that the journal, and the subfield overall, ontologically privileges gender over other politically relevant categories (see, e. g., Alexander-Floyd 2012). A limitation of gender analysis remains the degree to which it prioritizes a conception of difference that does not necessarily account for the degree to which other forms of identity always already shape what it means to be a man or a woman or a queer or nonbinary individual.

We recognize the challenge to scholars of systematically taking intersectionality into account, particularly challenging given the heterogeneity across individuals.<sup>1</sup> Where empirical findings are statistically significant but small, research on gender may exaggerate the degree to which gender is analytically and thus politically important. A risk of the focus on gender as an individual attribute is that it may overshadow the impact of other politically relevant factors, such as race, socioeconomic status, or religion. Another risk is the assumption that there is a set of politically significant attributes that is shared by half of the population. Treating gender as a process, produced by states and, in Crenshaw’s work, by law (1989; 1991), provides the foundation for intersectional scholarship, clarifying who counts as a “woman,” who is excluded from the category “woman,” and who is invisible as a woman — and how such distinctions are produced and imposed. It is important, therefore, that we as scholars are clear about who we define as women. When we talk about women, which women are we talking about?

One of the limitations of this history, however, is that it can lead to a path-dependent misconstrual of who counts as a woman. Research that focuses only on progressive, feminist politics and the expansion of women’s rights risks

assuming that all political women are necessarily progressive and feminist. A clear intellectual commitment deriving from feminist politics is the recognition that all women (setting aside for a minute the instability of that category) have agency. We continue to insist on treating women as fully capable of political engagement and, even in examples of severe oppression, refusing to start from a point of assuming women's inferiority or subordination to male authority. In particular, intersectionality theory, writ large, requires us to recognize that not all women are feminist. We view women's movements as distinct from feminist movements, and feminist movements as a subcategory of women's movements. In short, we consider it crucial for scholars to subject to intellectual scrutiny our starting, and often political, assumptions about what it means to be a man, woman, queer, or nonbinary person.

A significant problem with conceptualizing gender as an attribute of individuals is that there is no clear definition of what those attributes might be. There are limitations to relying uncritically on gender as an individual attribute in political science research. The attachment to sex as a firm marker of sex "difference" is a political commitment of states, and hence politically constructed and reinforced by social norms and law. Any claims about a firm basis of difference are bound to be fraught, and while the categories of women and men have political import and utility, biology does not provide a firm foundation, even as we employ sex difference as the means by which we can sort people. As Karen wrote in the first issue of *P&G*, "sex is not a safe port from which gender can happily embark" (Beckwith 2005, 130).

An enduring theme in the subfield is the tension between gender as a political and legal concept, and the instability of the body as the basis of difference. The concept of "woman" and "man" are legal concepts, even if such concepts are not biologically grounded, and they remain politically salient and powerful.<sup>2</sup> These observations prepare the ground for our explanation of "gender as process" in the next section.

## Gender as Process

*P&G*, from the outset, also encompassed understanding how gender moves through institutions and institutional rules, where gender functions not as a part of an individual's identity, but as a process (Chappell 2006). Gender as a process constructs meaning in institutions, structures, and practices, and functions to produce different impacts in categorizing women and men, and other gender categories, where "masculine and feminine actors (often men and women, but not perfectly congruent, and often individuals, but also structures) actively work to produce...gendered outcomes" (Beckwith 2005, 132). Gender as process is further understood as gendered values, behaviors, and practices that operate through institutions, rules, and structures, functioning as specific designations, but also as powerful silences. Legislation that differentiates rights under law on the basis of binary sex, or seeks to confirm it,<sup>3</sup> most clearly evidences how gender moves through law; similarly powerful are omissions in law and constitutions that render women invisible.<sup>4</sup> Laws, institutions,

conventions, and documents that appear neutral on their face have differential impacts on persons, advantaging some, sparing others, and oppressing still others. Gender as process functions this way as well, even as the process itself produces and reproduces gender.

Formal documents provide examples of how gender functions as a process, moving through government institutions and fundamental political cultural values. Gender as process also encompasses the ways that definitions of men and women, and of masculinity and femininity, shape laws regarding things such as citizenship, treaty obligations, and military service. Constitutions are a prime example of gender as process, where general equality provisions do not necessarily mention women or men, or mention women as mothers, or refer specifically to male citizens but not to female citizens. Some constitutions, for example South Africa, are explicit in identifying women and men as citizen categories; constitutions that are silent regarding gender and do not mention women, men, or sex in explicit terms can nonetheless be gendered in powerful ways. In general, where strong guarantees exist for citizens but yet are unspecified in regard to gender, such guarantees can nonetheless be characterized as masculine (Irving 2008).

In the previous section, we discussed what it means for gender to be defined as an individual attribute with regard to gender fluidity and intersectionality. A process approach to gender fluidity might study how political context and conditions shape the possibilities for gender expression and political action organized around queerness. Constitutions, institutions, conventions, and documents shape gender in terms of recognizing — or resisting recognition of — non-binary identities, diverse sexualities, and diverse sexual orientations. Language that explicitly ties rights to heteronormativity has likewise made the extension of rights to LGBTQ+ persons issues of struggle in the courts, in state legislatures, and through statewide referenda. We make no claim that there are clear similarities between the gendered circumstances of “women” and of those identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer. Nonetheless, how gender as sexual identity constructs and is constructed by political institutions presents major research opportunities for understanding more generally how politics and gender are mutually constitutive.

Similarly, a process approach to intersectionality might explore the ways in which institutions shape inclusion and exclusion (see Townsend-Bell 2014). Hancock (2007, 251) acknowledges this when she explains that “an intersectional research project examines categories at multiple levels of analyses...by means of an integrative analysis of the interaction between the individual and institutional levels of the research question.”

Gender also functions as a process within institutions across time, and gendered meanings and conventional understandings can also be transformed, even as the formal construction of an institution may not change. In the context of change, however, “supposed democratic expansions through the addition of new social rights or social provisioning measures, for instance, may inadvertently reinscribe gendered hierarchies by elevating traditionally masculine forms of civic contribution such as family provisioning or military service” (Ritter 2008,

19). Gender and institutions function as co-constitutive across time through their reinscription of difference.

Gender moves with political meaning and power through individual political systems, revealing the multiple ways in which gender empowers, disempowers, disadvantages, and renders people invisible. Gender also functions as a process across and between countries, and hence has international resonance and consequence. Countries vary in laws concerning citizenship, not only in their own country but in their willingness to recognize citizenship for persons of some countries but not others, related to marriage and other legal relationships (e.g., parental status and child citizenship). International relations and law are gendered in regard to international treaties (Baldez 2014), membership in international organizations (Chappell 2015), and the means by which law and policy concerning women, men, and gender are diffused across national boundaries. Claims about gender are employed as justification for warfare and for military intervention (Ferguson 2005). At the same time, gender as political process — explicit or hidden — is still in development in the subfield.

In sum, research on gender as a process “examines the ways in which politics shapes...differences between men and women” as well as the ways in which such differences emerge in and through political institutions and practices (Beckwith and Baldez 2005, 2). We offer this discussion as a reflection on the development of politics and gender as a research subfield, with the expectation that the best work in the discipline will continue to advance our understanding about how gender constructs, and is constructed by, the political.

### **The Relationship Between the Two Conceptions of Gender**

Most research in the subfield of politics and gender continues to rest upon gender understood as an individual attribute, but even the most straightforward invocations of gender as dichotomous and biologically based can still reveal the process by which men and women’s lives shape and are shaped by institutions. The boundaries between the two categories are porous and should remain so. We offer three examples to further illustrate the distinctions between the two conceptions of gender, and to demonstrate the ways that gender as individual attribute and gender as process operate in tandem.

One of the articles that we published in the journal’s first year explicitly illustrates the difference between gender as an individual attribute and gender as a process. Timothy Kaufman-Osborn’s “Gender Trouble at Abu Ghraib?” (2005) examines how people made sense of revelations in 2004 about the horrific torture that American soldiers committed against prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Media coverage at the time particularly emphasized the enthusiastic participation of female soldiers in that torture. Kaufman-Osborn frames his analysis in terms of two directions that contemporary discourse took with regard to the role of women in torturing prisoners, Army PFC Lynndie England in particular. Some commentators argued that England’s craven behavior was the inevitable consequence of gender equality in the military. For conservatives, England represented women keen to prove they were “one of the boys,” while



feminists argued that England's behavior demonstrated that being in the military inevitably led women to violate norms that define women as morally superior to men. Both perspectives rest on assumptions that gender is a form of identity and that is the precise reason that Kaufman-Osborn views them as problematic. The emasculation of prisoners is not the consequence of decisions made by individual soldiers, men or women, he maintains, but rather the way that political institutions advanced gendered meanings. The soldiers serving at the Abu Ghraib prison were ordered by their superiors to adhere to explicit instructions provided by military training manuals. Those manuals dictated the forms of prisoner (mis)treatment that constituted gender as "performative practices" that "engender bodies by regulations, constraining, and constituting their conduct in ways that prove intelligible in light of the never entirely stable or coherent categories of masculine and feminine" (Kaufman-Osborne 2005, 606). In sum, Kaufman-Osborne's argument is that some people blamed women for the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib because they, wrongly, viewed gender only as an attribute of individuals. Doing so misapprehends the way power worked in this instance as a gendered institutional mandate. In other words, focusing on the gender attribute of the actor without taking into account process can be misleading. We get a more accurate understanding of how gender works by explaining it as a feature of institutions that freights political activity with gendered meanings.

A second example that illustrates the relationship between gender as individual attribute and gender as process is Barbara Palmer and Dennis Simon's article, "When Women Run Against Women: The Hidden Influence of Female Incumbents in Elections" (2005), published in the journal's inaugural issue. Most of the articles published in *P&G* rely on a conception of gender as an individual attribute. But even articles that appear to accept straightforward, conventional notions of binary sex categories of men and women *a priori* can also be read as revealing how politics are, and can be, gendered in process. In this article, Palmer and Simon rely on evidence from US House races from 1956 to 2002 to test two hypotheses for the effects of female candidates' presence on the competitive electoral environment: the "competition hypothesis" and a "gender effect" hypothesis. They found that "female incumbents have a 'hidden influence' in House elections" (Palmer and Simon 2005, 47). Incumbent women were more likely than men to face competition in the general election and more likely to face a woman as their opponent. This was also true for primary races, where incumbent women faced challenges from women in their own party (Palmer and Simon 2005, 41). In this respect, "When Women Run Against Women" offers a straightforward analysis of the role of women in politics, where gender is seen as an individual attribute; that is, as involving self-identified women and men running for public office.

However, "When Women Run Against Women" can also be read as showing how the presence of an incumbent woman regenders politics as a process. In US House races, the presence of a self-identified incumbent woman requires political parties to redefine how they think about gender and how to present their candidates to the public in a context transformed by gender. Put differently, the presence of incumbent women as candidates regenders the electoral



competition in both parties and resets the strategic assessments of potential candidates. A woman successfully elected to office signals the possibility of such success to other women, including co-partisans, who then challenge the incumbent for the seat. Palmer and Simon (2005) employ conventional dichotomous distinctions between women and men as candidates — but their work also points to a broader understanding of how gender functions in, and changes, the electoral process. It goes beyond conventional electoral participation (i.e., simple incumbency, name recognition, media coverage, and campaign finance) to show that gender works through institutions to disrupt and redefine electoral politics.

The third example about the relationship between attribute and process highlights one of the decisions we made as editors about the governance of the journal. We were committed to convening an international Editorial Board. Of the 35 original board members, seven were at institutions in countries outside the US. Part of our rationale for doing so was to increase the journal's ability to reach international scholars as readers, as authors, and as manuscript reviewers. We wanted to make the editorial board more representative in international terms by increasing the number of scholars from countries other than the US. At face value, this is an example of selecting an editorial board on the basis of individual attributes, but we also wanted to increase our chances of publishing work that showed different ways of defining gender as process. We anticipated that scholars working outside the US would have different understandings of gender and of politics and would be able to identify and address different concepts, tensions, and puzzles in gender and politics by virtue of working in their country or region. Their inclusion, we hoped, would reveal different ways in which gender is a feature of institutions. Daniel Agbibo's recent article, "Out of the Shadows: The Women Countering Insurgency in Nigeria" (2022), the winner of the 2023 award for best article published in *P&G*, provides one example. In his study of the role that women have played in combating Boko Haram, Agbibo cautions against assumptions, common in the West, that women kidnapped by Boko Haram were forced to marry against their will; women chose to marry for a range of reasons that are congruent with the institution of marriage in the Nigerian context. Our efforts to internationalize the journal illustrate yet another way in which gender as individual attribute and gender as process are connected.

## Conclusion

We founded *P&G* with the aim of placing research on gender and politics squarely in the discipline of political science. We sought to strengthen the subfield by providing a venue for research that examines the myriad ways that conceptions of gender shape and are shaped by political phenomena. We wanted to create an outlet to publish research that employed the tools of political science critically, as well as research that challenged the methodologies that dominate the field. Our main intellectual goal, however, was to highlight scholarship that employed the concept of gender in thoughtful and self-conscious ways.

In this article we have reflected on the two conceptions of gender that undergird research in political science. Gender as an individual attribute is and remains the most common approach. Research in this category tends to explain things such as the behavior, attitudes, and political actions of women, men, and/or non-binary persons; differences between men, women, and non-binary persons in various arenas of political activity; or how law and policy affect men, women, and non-binary persons. It can include research on how overlapping attributes intersect with one another to shape political outcomes. Research in this category takes the existence of gendered individuals as a starting point, regardless of how gender is defined.

Gender as process, on the other hand, examines how political institutions define the context in which certain conceptions of gender are expressed, valued, or overlooked. It focuses on the ways that political institutions rely on conceptions of masculinity and femininity as the basis of decisions, policies, laws, and behaviors. This approach remains more elusive for political science, as it frequently involves delving deeply into historical processes and institutional formation and may require comparative political analysis. But it is nonetheless important in order to understand why certain ways of understanding gender persist.

As we have reflected on the conceptions of gender that guided our work as founding editors of *P&G*, we have become more aware of the ways in which the concepts of gender as individual attribute and gender as process can inform one another. Kaufman-Osborn's (2005) analysis suggests that commentators who focused on the roles of individual women misapprehended why the torture at Abu Ghraib occurred. Torture was not the result of the behavior of individual women, or of policies aimed at women soldiers per se, but was dictated by institutions that relied on gendered meanings more broadly. That article shows how focusing on gender as an individual attribute without understanding process can be misleading. Palmer and Simon's (2005) article can be read as a straightforward analysis of the ways that women running as incumbents can shape election outcomes. It can also be read as showing how including women can reshape the meanings that political actors attribute to electoral processes. Their work shows how the simple presence of a woman running for reelection as an incumbent can change the behavior of other female candidates and of political parties in terms of "conventional" electoral politics where most of the competitors are men. Finally, our efforts as editors to set the example of internationalizing the journal at its outset by increasing the representation of underrepresented groups on their face evince a "gender as individual attribute" approach — but the goal, or at least a goal, of promoting diversity and inclusion was to expand our ideas about how the political world works and to reveal the myriad meanings that gender can have in different contexts.

We hope these observations will encourage scholars in this subfield to continue to be explicit and intentional about the ways in which we deploy gender in our research. For two decades *P&G* has provided an important venue for advancing knowledge about the ways that politics shapes gender and vice

versa, and we look forward to the continuing success of what has become the premiere journal for publishing work in politics and gender.

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## Notes

1. We thank Mala Htun for raising this issue.
2. Even as some individual states are expanding their sex categories beyond a binary “female/male,” the power of the state to define sex and gender remains.
3. E.g., in current legislation in some US states that links access to public facilities based on sex identity at birth.
4. E.g., constitutional guarantees of rights with no explicit guarantee of rights for women.

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