

**Discourses as Institutions:
Gender and Candidate Selection Reform in Sweden and France**

Lenita Freidenvall
Department of Political Science
Stockholm University
106 91 Stockholm
Sweden
lenita.freidenvall@statsvet.su.se

and

Mona Lena Krook
Department of Political Science
Washington University in St. Louis
Campus Box 1063
One Brookings Drive
St. Louis, MO 63130
U.S.A.
mlkrook@wustl.edu

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Institutions are a central organizing concept in the study of politics. Earlier research in political science focused largely on institutions as the formal features of political systems, like political parties, electoral systems, and government bodies. The ‘new institutionalism’ extends this definition to include the procedures, routines, conventions, norms, and cognitive scripts that also structure political life, often as if they were formal rules (North 1990; March and Olsen 1989). However, institutionalists disagree with one another in three key respects: the type of institutionalism they espouse (Weingast 2002; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Thelen and Steinmo 1992), the relative role they assign to formal versus informal institutions (Helmke and Levitsky 2004), and the ways in which they conceptualize the dynamics of institutional stability and change (Krasner 1984; Thelen 2004). Aiming to bridge these divides, a number of recent contributions have developed an alternative approach – variously described as discursive institutionalism (Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Schmidt 2002), ideational institutionalism (Hay 2001), or constructivist institutionalism (Hay 2006; cf. Schmidt 2006) – which focuses on ideas, as communicated through discourse, as a means for better understanding the mechanisms of institutional emergence, survival, and reform.

This proliferation of perspectives has served to expand the reach of institutionalist theory into the study of a wide range of political phenomena. At the same time, however, it has led to a compartmentalization of institutionalist research, organized according to schools of thought, types of institutions, and patterns of institutional transformation. In this paper, we emphasize continuities rather than distinctions among these various approaches. To take the field forward in a more unified way, we draw on insights that have heretofore remained implicit in existing studies in order to elaborate a more comprehensive and analytically precise framework for institutionalist analysis. In the first section, we survey four main

schools of institutionalist research in political science, paying special attention to their perspectives on formal and informal institutions, as well as their views on dynamics of institutional stability and change. In the second section, we argue for a more inclusive and structured approach to the study of institutions in political life. Integrating elements left under-theorized in existing research, we introduce three conceptual innovations: discourses as institutions, institutional configurations and political outcomes, and institutional reforms understood in relation to institutional configurational change. In the third section, we apply these tools to analyze campaigns for candidate gender quotas in Sweden and France, two countries where women's groups have mobilized to increase the number of women elected to political office. Focusing on discursive strategies for institutional reform, we explore how discourses enable political change, but also constrain its form, content, and impact, together with reigning rules, practices, and norms. We conclude that this revised lens on institutions has a wide range of potential applications, especially in the area of public policy research.

Mapping the Four Institutionalisms: Institutions and Institutional Change

Research on institutions in political science has largely converged around four approaches: rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism, organizational or sociological institutionalism, and most recently, discursive institutionalism.¹ Although these perspectives diverge in terms of their particular institutions of interest, they share a concern to broaden the frame of reference to include formal as well as informal structures, behaviors, and beliefs. Interested in how institutions are created and endure, they theorize two basic

¹ Until recently, most scholars recognized three broad schools of institutionalist thinking: rational choice, historical, and sociological institutionalism (Hall and Taylor 1996; Immergut 1998). However, some recognize as many as seven distinct approaches, adding normative, empirical, interest representation, and international institutionalism (Peters 1999).

models of institutional stability and change, one focused on critical junctures and path dependence and one centered on institutional evolution and development.

Types of Institutionalism

Despite a common focus on institutions, the four main approaches to institutional analysis are characterized to a certain degree by distinct ontological and methodological commitments (Hay and Wincott 1998; but see Hall and Taylor 1998). For the most part, these lead them to analyze political phenomena using different sets of analytical assumptions and theoretical tools. Rational choice institutionalists work mainly at the micro-level, aiming to understand the origins of institutions, the mechanisms of their survival, and the nature of their effects on macro-level political outcomes (Weingast 2002). Drawing on the insights of game theory, they view institutions as conventions created by actors in order to overcome collective action problems (Ostrom 1990), either by reducing uncertainty (North 1990) or by restructuring incentives so that individuals are more motivated to cooperate (Weingast 2002). Some argue, as a consequence, that institutions endure when they provide more benefits to the relevant actors than alternative institutional forms. However, others are careful to stress that these dynamics do not necessarily ensure the most efficient outcomes (North 1990), and that in many cases, institutions are not only structures of coordination but also structures of power and domination (Knight 1992; Moe 2006).

Historical institutionalists, in contrast, conduct their research primarily at the meso- or macro-level, focusing on the long-term ramifications of largely contingent events (Pierson and Skocpol 2002). Interested in apparent historical inefficiencies, they approach institutions as the various formal and informal procedures, routines, norms, and conventions embedded in the organization of politics, society, and the economy. While concerned with how these

institutions permit and exacerbate various asymmetries of power (Thelen and Steinmo 1992), most of the theoretical attention in this literature relates to the concept of path dependence and the role of unintended consequences (Mahoney 2000). In the course of grappling with questions of sequencing and possible period effects (Lieberman 2001), however, other scholars have sought to nuance the division between institutional creation and institutional consequences. Seeking to call attention to dynamics of institutional development over time (Pierson 2004), they introduce concepts like institutional conversion and layering to capture what they see as more complicated relationships between continuity and change (Thelen 2003).

Organizational or sociological institutionalists, in turn, present a middle position centered on the links between micro- and macro-level political interactions (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Adopting a more interpretive lens, they define institutions to include formal rules, procedures, and norms, as well as symbol systems, cognitive scripts, and moral templates that provide the ‘frames of meaning’ guiding human behavior (March and Olsen 1989). More than the other two schools, they emphasize the interactive and mutually constitutive character of the relationship between institutions and individual actions. As such, they understand change not in relation to cost-benefit analysis or the legacies of past events, but instead in terms of attempts to enhance the social legitimacy of a particular institution (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Douglas 1986). These concerns, importantly, are not restricted to the level of the nation-state: as proponents of the ‘world polity’ school note, countries themselves are subject to global pressures to conform to the standards of a ‘modern’ state, leading many to adopt similar institutions in order to establish or enhance their legitimacy in the international sphere (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez 1997).

Discursive institutionalists, finally, engage with multiple levels of analysis, ranging from – and connecting – the micro- to the macro-level. Although these scholars embrace a relatively broad definition of institutions, compatible with rational choice, historical, and sociological perspectives, their approach differs from the others in a number of significant ways. First, it places greater emphasis on the role of ideas and discourses in influencing actor interests, preferences, and behaviors (Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Hay 2006). Second, it views discourse itself as a medium of power, able to reproduce the status quo through socialization, but also capable of transformation through processes of communication (Fischer 2003; Schmidt 2002). Following from this, third, it highlights the importance of discourse in generating and legitimizing ideas about political action, thereby outlining a theory of institutional change (Schmidt 2006). However, despite their attempts to bring ideas into institutional analysis, most scholars in this vein are careful to distinguish ‘discourses’ from ‘institutions,’ referring instead to the institutional contexts that affect discourses (Schmidt 2002) or to the discursive effects of institutions (Fischer 2003). Thus, while they stress the importance of discourse in institutional innovation, dynamism, and transformation (Hay 2006), they stop short of treating discourses on par with institutions themselves.

Formal and Informal Institutions

The common feature uniting all these approaches, despite their differences, is their attention to formal and informal institutions. Indeed, perhaps their most notable feature is their effort to confer the same theoretical, empirical, and methodological status to both kinds of institutions. Douglass North, for example, expands on his widely-cited definition of institutions as “the rules of the game in a society or...the humanly devised constraints the shape human interaction” (1990, 3) by describing these more specifically as “formal

constraints – such as the rules that human beings devise – and informal constraints – such as conventions and codes of behavior” (1990, 4). Similarly, in an overview of various types of institutional approaches, B. Guy Peters identifies an institution as a “structural feature of the society and/or the polity...that may be formal (a legislature, an agency in the public bureaucracy, or a legal framework), or may be informal (a network of interacting organizations, or a shared set of norms)” (1999, 18). These types of statements have led other scholars to characterize the object of inquiry in institutional analysis as a continuum between formal and informal institutions, “mov[ing] from the study of such intangible phenomena as ideas, meanings, signifiers, beliefs, identities, attitudes, worldviews, discourses, and values to such tangible entities as states, constitutions, bureaucracies, churches, schools, armies, parties, and groups” (Ethington and McDonagh 1995, 470).

Despite these tendencies, however, some researchers note important differences between formal and informal institutions. A great deal of attention, for example, has focused on why formal institutions do not have the effects that their creators intended (cf. Pierson 2004), and conversely, how and why informal institutions have the effects that they do. In an attempt to understand why informal institutions exist, some scholars hypothesize that informal rules emerge when formal institutions are complete; when actors prefer, but cannot achieve, a formal institutional solution; or when actors are pursuing goals that are not publicly acceptable, either because they are unlikely to stand the test of public scrutiny or will attract international condemnation (Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 730-731). This distinction is captured well in North’s observation that “formal rules may change overnight as the result of political or judicial decisions, [but] informal constraints embodied in customs, traditions, and codes of conduct are much more impervious to deliberate policies” (1990, 6). Although both kinds of institutions may delineate rules of appropriate behavior (cf. March and Olsen

1989), therefore, they may be subject to distinct processes of creation and alteration, at the same time that they may work together to shape political outcomes.

Perspectives on Institutional Stability and Change

Given these definitions of institutions as structures and constraints, most of this research focuses on institutional stability, seeking to explain how and why institutions lock the expectations and behavior of individuals into relatively predictable, self-reinforcing patterns, even in the face of major changes in background conditions. These tendencies, as Paul Pierson (2000) notes, are especially characteristic of political institutions: while market mechanisms may potentially disrupt dynamics of increasing returns in the economy, various features of politics make increasing returns more likely, namely the central role of collective action, the possibilities for employing political authority to magnify power asymmetries, and the absence or weakness of efficiency-enhancing mechanisms of competition and learning. Nonetheless, institutional change does sometimes occur. To account for these patterns, scholars have developed two broad models that present different views regarding the form and content of institutional innovation.

The first, and by far the most common, draws a sharp analytical distinction between moments of change and mechanisms of reproduction. According to this perspective, new institutions emerge rarely and often only in the context of crisis or great uncertainty. These ‘critical junctures,’ which cannot be predicted from prior events or initial conditions, serve as major turning points in which the – often contingent – decisions of actors establish certain directions of change (Collier and Collier 1991; Mahoney 2000). ‘Path dependence’ then precludes the emergence of other options over time through the mechanisms of increasing returns, sunk costs, durable commitments, personal and social conservatism, and learning

curves, to name but a few (North 1990; Pierson 2000). Crucially, these dynamics reinforce movement along a given trajectory, even when other choices appear better or more efficient (Aminzade 1992; Tilly 2001). This approach thus resembles a ‘punctuated equilibrium’ model in which long periods characterized by path dependence alternate with brief and dramatic turns of event (cf. Krasner 1984).

While still widely applied, this perspective has come under increasing challenge in recent years from scholars working in all four traditions who criticize this strict separation between institutional creation and institutional reproduction. Some rational choice theorists, for example, prefer a model of endogenous “institutional refinement,” whereby “institutions organically evolve (or are intentionally designed) through changing, introducing, or manipulating institutional elements while supplementing existing elements (or responding to their failure to generate desired behavior)” (Greif and Laitin 2004, 640). Along similar lines, several historical institutionalists note that “when institutions have been in place for a long time *most* changes will be incremental” (Pierson 2004, 153). Consequently, they theorize that institutions more typically survive through dynamics of institutional conversion, where existing institutions are directed to new purposes, and institutional layering, where some elements of existing institutions are renegotiated but other elements remain (Thelen 2003). These intuitions are echoed by some sociological institutionalists, who observe that “ideas about appropriate behavior ordinarily change gradually through the development of experience and the elaboration of worldviews” (March and Olsen 1989, 171). They are also the focus of various discursive institutionalists, who call attention to how elements of one discourse are translated into another through “discursive alliances or bricolage” (Campbell and Pedersen 2001, 12). Taken together, these views are closer to a ‘bounded innovation’

model in which periods of institutional reproduction overlap with moments of institutional creation in partial and often unanticipated ways (cf. Weir 1992).

Rethinking Institutionalism: Institutions, Configurations, and Dynamics of Change

The ‘institutional turn’ in political science thus provides crucial tools for analyzing various patterns and dynamics in political life. However, the tendency to compartmentalize institutional approaches, we argue, has prevented the elaboration of a more comprehensive framework for understanding how institutions emerge, interact, and evolve. After outlining the case for institutionalism as a more general approach to political analysis, we present a three-part strategy for engaging in a more precise study of formal and informal political institutions. This approach links three main conceptual innovations: classifying institutions according to four broad categories, viewing institutions not in isolation but as part of more complex institutional configurations, and situating shifts in individual institutions in relation to changes in wider institutional configurations.

Institutionalism as an Approach

Scholars distinguish between various schools of institutional thought for compelling reasons. Some argue that these perspectives are fundamentally incompatible because they are based on distinct ontologies, analytics, and methodologies (Hay 2006; Hay and Wincott 1998). Others seek to make a case for the superiority of one particular approach (Pierson and Skocpol 2002; Schmidt 2006; Weingast 2002). A number of recent projects, however, aim to overcome these divides by exploring what these various approaches might ‘learn’ from one another (Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Katznelson and Weingast 2005; Shapiro, Skowronek, and Galvin 2006). Indeed, some observe that this process has already started to

occur, noting that “the development of institutional analysis has muted the conventional distinctions among institutionalisms” (Clemens and Cook 1999, 446).

The main point of convergence across institutional approaches, as discussed above, is their collective attempt to expand the definition of ‘institution’ to include formal rules and organizations, as well as more informal practices and ideas. Despite their differences, this shared concern leads scholars of institutions to agree on two core points, one related to institutional creation and the other to institutional effects. First, all four perspectives emphasize the historical nature of institutions as conventions created by individuals in the past, either intentionally or unintentionally, but most often through processes of conflict and contestation. As such, they highlight the human origins of many institutions that today appear to be ‘natural’ principles of social organization (Douglas 1986). Once established, these institutions often reduce the scope of human agency to activity or choice within constraints (North 1990), even though it might appear to be more rational – at least when viewed from a distance – for individuals to make other decisions and pursue other types of behaviors.

Second, all institutionalists recognize – in some fashion – the relational nature of institutions. On one level, they view institutions as conventions enacted by individuals that simultaneously constitute these same individuals (Campbell and Pedersen 2001). Thus, after learning ‘how things are done,’ individuals are motivated to comply because otherwise their actions and the actions of others might not be understood (Jepperson 1991). On another level, these scholars recognize that institutions set in motion various dynamics that mediate interactions among individuals themselves. More specifically, institutions influence individual behavior through an incentive structure or coordination effect, whereby common cultural beliefs or norms give rise to a set of socially structured interests – as well as an organized

system of social incentives – that lead actors to adapt their interactions in ways that reflect and reinforce the logic of the system, despite possible changes in the moral imperatives that initially generated these beliefs and norms. Institutions shape relations between individuals, in turn, through a distributional effect, which comes into play when institutions privilege some groups and disadvantage others in the course of structuring social interactions (Thelen 1999; cf. Knight 1992).

Discourses and Institutions

These shared features suggest that it is possible to devise a more unified approach to institutional analysis. Revisiting the existing definitions of ‘institutions’ offered by scholars in various schools of institutional thought, it becomes evident that together they use this term to refer to four basic phenomena: rules, practices, norms, and discourses. These categories overlap and intersect to a certain extent, but are nonetheless roughly distinguishable from one another. Rules figure prominently in nearly all definitions of political institutions (see for example March and Olsen 1989; North 1990; Pierson and Skocpol 2002; Schmidt 2006). In most instances, they refer to the formal features of a political system, as well as to the laws that officially structure the conduct of political life. However, they may also encompass the more informal conventions that dictate how a society is in fact governed on a day-to-day basis, as in the case of countries with alternative centers of power or unwritten constitutions.

Practices are also frequently mentioned, along with related concepts like routines, rituals, and ceremonies. These institutions are formal to the degree that they involve officially sanctioned and prescribed political behavior. They are quite varied but might include the use of primary elections within some political parties, the custom in some countries that politicians give up their party affiliations before assuming national leadership

positions, and the organization of military parades for certain kinds of national celebrations. Conversely, practices are informal to the extent that they entail routines or rituals that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels (cf. Helmke and Levitsky 2004). These might involve more ‘back-room’ methods of candidate selection, or the development of ‘parallel societies’ to organize the provision of school, health care, and other services among members of oppressed minority groups.

Norms are a third category which scholars sometimes associate with beliefs, ideas, and symbols. More than any other kind of institution, norms invoke the ‘logic of appropriateness’ identified by James G. March and Johan P. Olsen to describe behaviors that are “intentional but not willful,” in which “action stems from a conception of necessity, rather than preference” (1989, 160-161). However, while norms govern what citizens see as right and just (Rothstein 1998), they also often entail specific mechanisms of enforcement, as norms do not hold a total monopoly on political behavior. Legal norms, like principles of equality, democracy, and freedom from violence, are formally monitored by the state. In contrast, more informal norms, like respect for others, attendance at religious services, and notions of patriotic duty, are more often enforced by family members, relatives, friends, and acquaintances (cf. Nee 1998).

Rules, practices, and norms are widely accepted across the literature as examples of institutions, even though they are rarely conceptualized as distinct types. To these, the recent rise of discursive institutionalism suggests adding a fourth category: discourses. Interestingly, most proponents of this approach are careful to separate discourses from their definitions of ‘institutions’ (Kjær and Pedersen 2001; Schmidt 2002). However, there are good reasons to consider discourses as institutions in their own right. As Kennet Lynggaard notes:

“Discourses unfold as ideas are articulated and, over time, are turned into rules-based systems of concepts and conceptions...Institutions, in turn, are authorized and sanctioned discourse. The set of rules governing a discourse are referred to as institutions when these rules, through processes of institutionalization, have attained some degree of authority and been linked to sanctions” (2007, 294).

Stated slightly differently, “discourse...does more than reflect a social or political ‘reality’; it actually constitutes much of the reality that has to be explained” (Fischer 2003, viii). Formal discourses are those that have already achieved dominance in organizing the perceptions and behaviors of broad groups of people, like discussions invoking the ‘American dream’ in the United States or the ‘universal citizen’ in France, which serve to legitimate certain courses of public policy while delegitimizing others. Informal discourses, in contrast, are those that challenge hegemonic discourses, but most often remain below the radar in relation to prevailing patterns of speech (cf. Gramsci 1971).

Institutional Configurations and Political Outcomes

Most scholars allude to many different kinds of institutions in their theoretical discussions. However, in their empirical analyses many often restrict their focus to a single institution in order to understand its particular origins and effects on political outcomes. This choice is justified by some on the grounds that “attempt[s] to cover all types of ‘institutions’ run a high risk of overgeneralization and necessarily obscure many features distinctive to the study of [certain] institutions” (Pierson 2004, 104, n. 1). Yet, adopting this approach misses an opportunity to explore how various kinds of institutions fit together as part of a “complicated ecology of interconnected rules” (March and Olsen 1989, 170; cf.

Nee 1998). These webs of institutions may be characterized by a range of different dynamics. On the one hand, they may form part of a self-enforcing, mutually reinforcing set of “institutional elements that motivate, coordinate, and enable individuals to follow particular regularities of behavior” (Greif and Laitin 2004, 635). On the other hand, they may involve ongoing clashes between different institutions, as “the institutions of a polity are not created or recreated all at once, in accordance with a single ordering principle; they are created instead at different times, in the light of different experiences, and often for quite contrary purposes” (Orren and Skowronek 2004, 112). These perspectives suggest that any number of institutions may “surround, support, elaborate, and contradict” (March and Olsen 1989, 22) the effects of any other given institution.

While limited to interactions between formal and informal institutions, Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky (2004) offer some initial insights into how institutions may combine to produce political outcomes. They argue that results depend on the degree to which formal and informal institutional goals converge, as well as the extent to which rules and procedures are enforced and complied with in practice. As such, the relations between them may be complementary, where informal institutions fill in gaps not addressed by formal rules or simply facilitate the implementation of these rules; accommodating, where informal institutions create incentives that contradict the spirit, but not the letter, of formal rules; competing, where informal institutions structure incentives that are incompatible with formal rules, thus requiring actors to choose which one to follow; and substitutive, where informal institutions enable actors to achieve outcomes compatible with formal rules in places where formal institutions themselves are ineffective. These multiple patterns indicate that the effects of one institution may depend on the shape of the other institutions operating within the same political context. Acknowledging that various elements are at

work simultaneously, in turn, suggests that some institutions may change while others remain the same, with important implications for how scholars evaluate the effects of institutional reform.

Dynamics of Institutional Reform and Change

Existing research on institutions, as already mentioned, has been criticized for its greater attention to institutional stability than to questions of institutional change. A closer look at the literature, however, reveals some intuitions as to the source and nature of institutional reform. On one end of the spectrum, scholars theorize change as the intended or unintended consequence of strategic action in an institutional environment that favors certain strategies and perceptions over others (Hay and Wincott 1998). At the other end, they identify the institutional order as a source of change, with individual institutions being more vulnerable in cases where a number of institutional orders coexist and interactions and encounters among these orders create ‘friction’ between mismatched institutional patterns, forcing actors to find new ways of advancing their aims through new institutional forms or through adaptation to take advantage of new institutional opportunities (Lieberman 2002; Orren and Skowronek 2004). The first position posits a role for ‘political entrepreneurs,’ who may either be “well-situated and creative actors [who] play a crucial role in framing proposals so as to motivate participants and fashion coalitions” (Pierson 2004, 136), or members of “groups marginal to the political system [who] are more likely to tinker with institutions....[because] denied the social benefits of current institutional configurations, marginal groups have fewer costs associated with deviating from those configurations” (Clemens and Cook 1999, 452). The second emphasizes the constraints posed by existing

institutional configurations, which may present limited – and largely structured – choices at generally unexpected moments of institutional crisis.

Once institutionalized, reigning rules, practices, norms, and discourses are generally difficult to alter. However, whether formal or informal, the first three categories of institutions – rules, practices, and norms – are particularly ‘sticky,’ as they are generally ‘captured’ by elite groups who have incentives to maintain their operation (cf. Clemens and Cook 1999). Discourses, in contrast, offer greater opportunities for innovation because change is an “internal aspect of a discourse” (Kjær and Pedersen 2001, 221), constituting political action through interactions between “hegemonic discourses embedded in the existing institutions” and the “oppositional efforts of other groups attempting to create new discourses” (Fischer 2003, 45). Indeed, some scholars argue, the existence of alternative discourses is a necessary condition for institutional change (Lynggaard 2007). Yet, they are not a sufficient condition: after new ideas emerge, they must be articulated as discourse and then communicated to others in ways that persuade – or at least resonate – during moments of ideational crisis and uncertainty (Blyth 2002; Hay and Wincott 1998). In most instances, new discourses fail to become institutionalized. In cases where they succeed, proponents usually achieve change by adhering closely to existing political principles in order to gain the legitimacy to displace reigning understandings (cf. Benford and Snow 2000). In this sense, efforts to reform discourses are subject to the same constraints as attempts to change other types of institutions. Nonetheless, as the nature of discourse is communication, chances to articulate non-hegemonic discourses – and, indeed, to expose reigning discourses as constructed ways of seeing the world, rather than as objective truths – are greater than opportunities to propose new rules, practices, and norms, both for members of dominant and more marginalized groups.

Although the articulation of new discourses may provide a much needed impetus for change, actors may nonetheless attempt – and succeed – in shifting reigning rules, practices, and norms, despite whatever barriers exist (cf. Krook 2005). As the wider body of research on institutions reveals, however, these reforms do not take place in a vacuum. Rather, they proceed in (1) a temporal relation to previous institutions within that category and (2) the causal context of broader institutional configurations. These two features of institutional life go far in explaining why “institutional change rarely satisfies the prior intentions of those who initiate it [as] change cannot be controlled precisely” (March and Olsen 1989, 65), because “changes in the environment of any complex system produce a series of actions and reactions that need to be calibrated before the ultimate consequences are understood” (March and Olsen 1989, 57). Evaluating the form and impact of institutional reform thus requires a three-stage research strategy that maps existing institutional configurations, evaluates the nature and degree of attempted institutional change, and explores the ways in which these reforms interact with stability and change in other political institutions.

Discursive Strategies for Institutional Reform: Gender Quotas in Sweden and France

The adoption of gender quotas reflects one particular set of attempts to alter political institutions in recent years. Following domestic and international pressures to increase the number of women elected to national parliaments, political parties and national legislatures in more than one hundred countries have approved measures that include reserved seats, which involve constitutional reforms that set aside places for women in political assemblies that men are not eligible to contest; party quotas, which entail pledges by individual parties to nominate a specific percentage of women; and legislative quotas, which comprise changes to electoral laws and sometimes constitutions to require that all parties put forward a certain

proportion of female candidates (Dahlerup 2006; Krook 2005; Lovenduski 2005). The existing literature on quotas focuses extensively on the rules (Htun and Jones 2002; Matland 2006; Schmidt and Saunders 2004), practices (Davidson-Schmich 2006; Kittilson 2006), norms (Meier 2000; Krook 2006; Opello 2006), and discourses (Holli et al 2006; Freidenvall 2005; Sgier 2004) shaping patterns of quota adoption and implementation. However, the origins, form, and impact of these policies have rarely been analyzed using an institutionalist framework, despite a clear intersection with institutionalist concerns (but see Krook 2005).

Most studies begin with an analysis of quota debates, seeking to understand how proposals for quotas are framed and justified within specific political contexts. In these discussions, advocates and opponents compete to link their particular positions to the goals and values of the population at large. In this sense, quota campaigns are often initiated as discursive struggles to define – and then maintain or reformulate – existing rules, practices, and norms of candidate selection. Individual campaigns succeed and fail in these tasks to varying degrees: quota policies may or may not be adopted, and when they are, may or may not have major effects on the numbers of women elected (Dahlerup 2006; Krook 2007). To unravel the causal processes at work, we examine and compare two cases where ostensibly similar quota policies produce quite different results: the case of Sweden, where 50% party quotas adopted by most political parties generated the election of 47% women in 2006, and the case of France, where a 50% legislative quota imposed all political parties led to the election of only 12% women in 2002 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2007). This divergence is even more striking given important parallels in the two countries' quota debates: conscious to avoid the word 'quota,' advocates in Sweden sought to frame their demand in terms of a countryside dance tradition known as *varannan damernas* ('every other one for the ladies'), while supporters in France discussed their proposals in terms of the principle of *parité*

(‘parity’). After sketching these debates, we analyze the effects of their associated policy reforms according to the three-part strategy outlined above: the prior configuration of rules, practices, norms, and discourses; the nature and degree of endeavored institutional reform; and the interactions between these changes and shifts and stability in the three other types of political institutions.

Every Other One for the Ladies: The Principle of Varannan Damernas in Sweden

Quota debates in Sweden can be traced back to the 1920s, soon after women gained the right to vote, when the Social Democratic Party’s Women’s Federation suggested adopting gender quotas so that women could be placed in safe seats on the party’s lists. At the time, this proposal was rejected on the grounds that all positions on the lists should be based on equal opportunity and subject to open competition (Karlsson 1996). Over the next fifty years, women continued to mobilize but generally succeeded in only getting one woman – the ‘obligatory woman’ – on various electoral slates, most often at the ‘decorative places’ at the bottom of the lists. By the 1970s, the ‘sex role debate’ – which focused on changing both women’s and men’s roles in society – led to renewed efforts to get more women included on party lists, this time focused on gaining equal representation for women and men in political life. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, as women went from being viewed as a minority interest within the parties to being seen as a majority of the citizenry (Sainsbury 2004), the policies for promoting their representation slowly radicalized, moving from general recommendations to more specific targets, adopted by a growing number of parties from across the political spectrum (Freidenvall 2006).

In this context, a state commission was convened to analyze why women constituted a very small minority in state committees, when they formed a relatively high proportion of

all elected officials, at the time around 30%. The authors of the report rejected the dominant view that increases in women's representation were the result of 'natural development' that would continue until equality was eventually achieved. Due to pressures from the interest organizations and the political parties, the commission stopped short of calling for quotas to be implemented. Instead, they pointed to a system of gender balance devised by the local Social Democrats in Järfälla, a municipality on the outskirts of Stockholm, which involved devising two lists – one composed of women and one composed of men – which were then combined to ensure that equal numbers of women and men would be elected. The report playfully dubbed this system of alternation *varannan damernas*, which literally meant 'every other one for the ladies' and referred to a custom on dance floors where every other song was women's turn to invite the men (also known as 'democratic dancing'). Although the functional equivalent of a quota, this concept appeared to soften demands for a radical redistribution of political power by alluding to sympathetic rules of 'taking turns.' As such, it avoided any reference to conflicts of interest between women and men, enabling calls for equal representation to resonate with dominant discourses of 'consensus' and 'equality' in Swedish society (Bergqvist 1994; Freidenvall, Dahlerup, and Skjeie 2006).

Although not intended to be applied in the sphere of electoral politics when it was published in 1987, the report gained renewed visibility in 1991 when women's representation dropped for the first time since 1928 from 38% to 34% (Eduards 1992, 86). While this figure was still high in comparison to other countries, the election sent shockwaves throughout Sweden, because many had believed the upward trend to be irreversible. Women's groups responded by exerting pressures within their parties, as well as by becoming involved in

cross-party network known as *Stödstrumporna* (the ‘Support Stockings’)² that threatened to form its own women’s party if established parties did not take steps to elect more women in future elections. In 1993, the Social Democratic Party announced that it would apply the principle of *varannan damernas* on all lists for all elections. Similar policies were soon adopted in almost all other parties in Sweden, some of which opted for a policy of strict alternation and others of which preferred softer formulations that nonetheless achieved much the same effect (i.e., through policies that aimed to have ‘at least 40% of either sex’). The result was the election of 41% women in 1994, 43% in 1998, 45% in 2002, and 47% in 2006, roughly approximating the demand for equal representation (Riksdagen 2003; Inter-Parliamentary Union 2007)

Before the debates on *varannan damernas*, Sweden was characterized by mix of institutions that were more and less favorable to women’s representation. Electoral rules were relatively stable throughout this period, involving a proportional representation (PR) electoral system with high district magnitudes and closed party lists. Scholars consistently associate all three of these features with higher numbers of women in politics (Caul 1999; Salmond 2006). Party practices were somewhat favorable: many parties felt obligated to include women on their lists, but they varied greatly in terms of their commitment and the tools that they applied to ensure the selection of female candidates. In general, the parties with the most binding measures – those who made ‘gender’ a central criterion of candidate selection – were those with the highest proportions of women in parliament (Wängnerud 2001). Norms were perhaps the most contested. Women were initially considered ‘represented’ as long as one woman was selected. Over time, however, the definition of

² The word in Swedish is a play on words in several senses. Although its primary meaning refers to the fact that the Support Stockings were a support network for women in politics, the term rhymes with *Rödstrumporna* (‘Redstockings’), the radical feminist movements in Scandinavia in the 1970s, and literally means support hosiery, an allusion to the fact that many of the women involved tended to be middle-aged and older.

‘representation’ expanded as women moved from being considered a ‘special interest’ to being recognized as ‘one half of the citizenry.’ Nonetheless, women’s groups continued to struggle with existing normative perceptions regarding the term ‘quota,’ which many parties framed as undemocratic and as implying the selection of unqualified women. These issues were played out through discourses of ‘consensus’ and ‘equality’ that undermined attempts to enact strict quotas for women (Freidenvall 2005).

When women’s representation declined in 1991, the notion of *varannan damernas* enabled a shift in thinking about gender quotas, as it drew on the very discourses of consensus and equality that had previously undermined quota adoption and used them to justify them. In a context where electoral rules entailed closed-list PR, the application of an alternation policy in party selection practices improved opportunities for more women to be placed in higher spots on party lists. Indeed, these reforms designated ‘gender’ as a core organizing principle for the entire candidate list, above more traditional considerations like class, age, geography, and occupation. These changes, in turn, influenced a reformulation of political norms, which transformed earlier calls for ‘proportionate’ representation – i.e., ‘some women’ to represent ‘all women’ – into demands for the election of equal numbers of women and men. Lingering discursive ambivalence over the term ‘quota,’ nonetheless, reflected continued normative resistance among many elites to any sort of positive action that might create unfair advantages for one sex over the other. The light-hearted reference to a dance floor tradition, however, enabled supporters to frame a policy that was essentially a 50% quota as a measure aimed only at the equal division and sharing of political power, a more radical claim for equal representation that was all the same more consistent with reigning political norms and discourses. Thus, while the adoption of gender quotas in Sweden was aimed mainly at reforming party selection practices, debates over these policies

intersected in various ways with existing rules, norms, and discourses. In this case, the content of institutions shifted in mutually reinforcing ways, leading to the achievement of nearly equal numbers of women and men in the Swedish parliament.

The Two Sexes of the Universal Citizen: The Concept of Parité in France

Proposals for quotas in France first emerged in the 1970s, when women inside the Socialist Party (PS) began to demand special measures to promote women's representation inside and outside the party. Advocates argued that the adoption of quotas was consistent with party ideology and would demonstrate the party's commitment to achieving equality between women and men. In 1974, the national party convention approved a 10% quota for women in party leadership positions and as candidates for elections by PR, a proportion that was increased at subsequent party conventions in 1977 and 1979. Further proposals to raise the quota to 30% were not passed until 1990, however, and women had to wait until 1996 until this quota was extended to elections run by majoritarian vote (Appleton and Mazur 1993; Opello 2006). As these debates took place inside the PS, several female members of parliament pursued a parallel strategy to increase women's representation through quotas at the local level. In 1982, they succeeded in passing a law that as part of a broader bill on local government reform limited to 75% the percentage of candidates of the same sex who could appear on lists for municipal elections. Deputies voted nearly unanimously in favor of the measure, but as many anticipated, the Constitutional Council reviewed the bill several months later (Bird 2003; Mossuz-Lavau 1998). It declared the quota article unconstitutional, on the grounds that it violated the principle of equality before the law, which prohibited the division of voters and candidates into categories for the purpose of voting.

While many feminists paid little attention to this verdict at the time (Gaspard 1998), it reaffirmed a principle of equal opportunities that precluded future attempts to institute equal outcomes through gender-specific means. Nonetheless, by the end of the 1980s this conception of equality came under greater scrutiny as feminist and non-feminist scholars began to engage in a more critical examination of the principles and goals underlying the theory and practice of democracy in France. In the context of the bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989, a growing number began to attribute women's absence from politics to the Revolution itself and, especially, its core principle of the universal citizen (Fraisie 1989). This led to the publication of a manifesto entitled *Au pouvoir citoyennes! Liberté, égalité, parité*,³ which proposed changing the law to state that elected assemblies be composed of as many women as men – what they described as *parité* (Gaspard, Servan-Schreiber, and Le Gall 1992). Over the course of the 1990s, supporters focused on reframing the discourses that had previously undermined quota implementation by arguing that current understandings of equality and representation – as well as their subject, the universal citizen – were originally deemed to apply only to men. They suggested that inscribing *parité* in the constitution was the only way to recognize explicitly the two sexes of the universal citizen, a reform that – they claimed – was crucial to the general welfare of society, because ‘sex’ was the universal difference among human beings cutting across all other groups, categories, and communities (Agacinski 2001). They emphasized that *parité* differed from ‘quotas,’ because while quotas implied special representation rights for minorities, parity simply called for the equitable sharing of power between women and men, the ‘two halves of the human race.’ Inscribing

³ The title of this book reconfigures two central slogans of the French Revolution: *aux armes citoyens* (to arms, citizens), the refrain of the French national anthem, and *liberté, égalité, fraternité* (liberty, equality, fraternity), the motto of French republicanism.

parité in the constitution thus would not reverse the accomplishments of the French Revolution, but rather would finally fully realize them (Scott 2005).

Following a vivid set of public debates, a bill on *parité* was eventually introduced. In 1999, both houses of parliament amended Article 3 of the Constitution to state that “the law favors the equal access of women and men to electoral mandates and elective functions,” as well as Article 4 to require that political parties “contribute to the execution of the principle set forth in the last section of Article 3 under the conditions determined by the law” (*Journal Officiel*, 9 July 1999: 10175). In 2000, these reforms were supported by changes to the electoral code that specified the elections to which the parity principle would be applied, the moments when compliance would be monitored, and the sanctions that would be imposed on parties for not fully meeting these requirements. Nonetheless, the final shape of these reforms disappointed many of their advocates, as the term parity’ was rejected in favor of the term ‘equal access,’ while the verb ‘guarantees’ was substituted with ‘favors’ (*favoriser*) equal access. Through these two alterations, the more radical claim for equal representation of women and men was reduced to the milder goal of simply increasing the number of female candidates (Bird 2003). The limits of this approach are apparent in the outcomes of these reforms: while women’s representation increased dramatically from 26% to 48% in local councils in 2001,⁴ with many parties exceeding the provisions of the law, it barely inched up from 11% to 12% in the National Assembly in 2002, due largely to decisions by the major parties not to implement the law (Murray 2004). These variations stem from the fact that party lists that did not comply with the law at the local level were not eligible to contest the

⁴ The law did not apply to towns with fewer than 3500 inhabitants, due to the fact that these towns are governed by a different type of electoral system, which allows voters to strike candidates’ names, change the order of candidates, and add new names to the list.

election, while those that did not comply at the national level were subject to a financial penalty that could be overcome by winning more seats (Krook 2005; Sineau 2001).

In the years leading up to the parity debates, most institutions of candidate selection were largely unfavorable to women's representation. The electoral rules blocked major gains for women, as the two-round majoritarian system enabled parties to exclude women almost entirely, according to them because women were 'unlikely to win.' This pattern was true under PR as well, however: when PR elections were applied in 1986, women comprised nearly 25% of all candidates but had been placed in less than 6% of all electable positions (Mossuz-Lavau 1998, 24-25). Similarly, no parties apart from the PS made 'gender' a criterion of candidate selection. Even in that case, the party's commitment was weak, as its policy explicitly excluded legislative elections from the ambit of the party quota. In spite of these considerable barriers, norms were the most problematic from the point of view of instituting any special measures to bring more women into political office. Legal decisions in the 1980s reinforced conceptions of 'equality' and 'representation' that undermined attempts to pursue quotas at the statutory level, which were discursively construed as being a threat to the core values of French republicanism. Indeed, 'quotas' were described in many debates as distinctively 'un-French' – even disparagingly as 'American' – measures that would not improve women's status, but that would instead escalate claim-making by other groups and subsequently erode the cultural assimilation at the heart of the French republic (Millard and Ortiz 1998; Scott 1998).

In this context, advocates employed the same discourses of universalism and equality that had previously blocked the implementation of quotas in order to gain the adoption of a 50% quota law. Interestingly, the need to work within prevailing discourses enabled – and, indeed, required – supporters to press for a much more radical set of reforms, including an

amendment to the French constitution, because these could be framed as more consistent with existing values and traditions than the earlier 25% quota law. Whereas quotas had been rejected in the 1980s on the grounds that they ‘divided’ citizens into ‘categories,’ a focus on *parité* presented an opportunity to frame women not as a ‘special interest’ but rather as one of the ‘two halves of the human race.’ The resulting changes to the constitution and the electoral law not only permitted, but also promoted, the use of positive action to increase women’s political representation. However, the campaign’s central concern with norms and discourses was not matched by similar success in shifting the rules and practices of candidate selection. In fact, during the debates over parity reform, all the major political parties stood against any change in the two-round majoritarian electoral system for National Assembly elections. At the same time, legislators devised very loose regulations for the implementation of parity in these elections, imposing no placement requirements and only a weak financial penalty for parties whose selection procedures did not conform to the quota law. As a result, the adoption of gender quotas in France achieved important shifts in discourses and formal norms, but made little impact on the rules and practices that also shape women’s access to political office. Thus, these institutions worked at cross-purposes to each other, producing few gains in the numbers of women elected to the French parliament.

Conclusions: Towards a New Framework of Institutions and Institutional Change

Research in political science presents a series of tools for analyzing the role of institutions in structuring the conduct and meaning of political life. However, a proliferation of competing perspectives in institutional analysis has obscured some of the basic dynamics of interest to all institutional scholars. Further, it has prevented the development of greater analytical precision in identifying and situating distinct kinds of political institutions – which

we describe here in terms of the four categories of rules, practices, norms, and discourses – as part of broader configurations of political institutions. Understanding how institutions operate, we argue, thus requires attention to multiple institutions and the ways in which they work together – or in opposition to one another – to shape political outcomes. To illustrate the benefits of this approach, we examined the cases of two quota campaigns to explore why ostensibly similar sets of quota requirements – 50% quotas applied in most political parties in Sweden and a 50% quota law imposed on all parties in France – witnessed quite disparate results in terms of the election of equal numbers of women and men to national parliaments. In Sweden, discursive strategies for change were directed mainly at reforming party selection practices, but interacted with reigning rules and norms in ways that promoted the selection of women in nearly similar numbers to men. In France, analogous attempts at discursive change succeeded in shifting formal norms, but had almost no effect on existing rules and practices, such that women’s representation remained nearly the same as before the parity campaign – and, indeed, still far below the world average of 17% (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2007).

A lens focused on institutions and institutional configurations, in turn, presents an opportunity to better structure the findings of the wider literature on gender quotas. As already noted, scholars already theorize the importance of rules, practices, norms, and discourses in shaping patterns of quota adoption and implementation. Yet, few researchers frame their findings in relation to political institutions, much less in terms of institutional configurations, even though their empirical work is broadly consistent with this perspective (cf. Krook 2005). This suggests that other areas of political science – but especially studies of the origins and outcomes of public policies – are likely to benefit from closer attention to the role of institutions in shaping political results. Indeed, applying this approach is apt to affect

how scholars conceptualize the nature of political stability and change, as it confers a roughly similar causal status to rules, practices, norms, and discourses, recognizing that all four have more or less analogous effects on political outcomes, whether they are formal or informal. Gauging their more precise causal effects, however, requires that researchers pay attention to – and ultimately theorize – the environment in terms of the other types of institutions that may contribute to, or interact with, the particular institutions under consideration. While implicit in many studies, this approach must be made explicit in order to facilitate the accumulation of collective knowledge on the broader role of institutions in political life.

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