Power, exclusion and empowerment: Feminist innovation in political science

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I argue that feminist political science contributes to our understanding of power, especially through the concept of empowerment, giving us the conceptual tools to grapple with phenomena such as the impact of feminist movements and other initiatives of marginalized groups organizing to contest inequality and oppression. These concepts bring informal politics into the formal sphere and show the limits of a formal, top-down approach to power and politics more generally. It reveals how intersectionality and power are linked. I illustrate this argument in a discussion of the recent #metoo campaign, as well as through a brief examination of abortion policy and foreign policy in Canada and the United States. I conclude that, the reciprocal influence of feminist scholarship and political science has been one of mutual enrichment, though the contribution of feminist political science to the broader discipline has been limited by male bias that leads scholars to overlook and discount work by women in the discipline.

1. Introduction

In Fall of 2017, a movement to make sexual harassment more visible resulted in punitive consequences for powerful men in film, television, radio, and theatre. This #metoo campaign - so called because of the twitter hashtag that spread through social media - also reached the technology industry, where the firm Uber fired twenty employees for sexual harassment. High-profile resignations followed in advertising and other industries as well. In academia, professors in Philosophy, Astronomy, Education, Political Science and Geology have been publicly accused of sexual harassment. Indeed, as the #metoo campaign spread its attention to political office, men holding elective office in the U.S. Congress - on both sides of the aisle - were accused of violations from sexual assault to groping. Though the sphere of politics may be more impervious to public campaigns than others, right now, the 'Dean of the House,' John Conyers, the longest serving member of the house, has resigned his position as ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, and his Democratic colleagues are calling on him to resign (Rhodan, 2017; Viebeck & Weigel, 2017). A review of how the house handles complaints of workplace harassment is being undertaken, and a bipartisan group of lawmakers has introduced an act to improve the process of complaints called the Me Too Congress Act. New training for members has been mandated by a new resolution (Rhodan, 2017). The movement is not confined to the United States, with sexual harassment allegations swirling around thirty-six members of the governing Conservative Party in the British Parliament, and “Me Too Moments” reported in the European Parliament. Some observers celebrate the fact that the era of silent acceptance of the sexual exploitation of women appears to be over, and men in positions of power are no longer able to claim immunity from sexual harassment (e.g. Barnes, 2017; Klein, 2017).

Political science, with its traditional focus on power, offers useful insights into the current contestation over sexual harassment. In this essay, I argue that feminist political science in particular has contributed to our understanding of power, especially by introducing the idea of empowerment, giving us the conceptual tools to grapple with phenomena such as the impact of the #metoo campaign, feminist movements, and other cases when women and other marginalized groups...
have organized to contest inequality and oppression. How can we account for the ability of the seemingly powerless (everyday citizens, women) to take on powerful men, men at the very apex of powerful institutions?

This question becomes especially compelling in the context of the male dominance that seems to characterize, and persist in, virtually every sphere of modern society, even at a global level: Men still disproportionately dominate national and international politics in most places (Interparliamentary Union, 2017), and in spite of some degree of progress, this pattern of disproportionate male representation may seem unlikely to change. In 2016, the United Nations passed over many qualified women to choose yet another man as secretary general. In the same year in the United States, the first woman to stand as a nominee of one of the two main political parties lost to an opponent who boasted of grabbing women sexually against their will, and whose campaign and supporters employed a wide variety of sexist gibes throughout the campaign. A woman has never been elected President in the United States; a portion of the electorate says they are “not ready” for a woman President. Although in other countries, women make up the majority of legislators (Bolivia and Rwanda), or even a larger proportion of legislators (Sweden or Seychelles, where they comprise more than 40%), even in these places, men still dominate the economic sphere. Worldwide, most (60%) of corporate boards do not have any women’s presence at all, and only 5% have a woman as CEO (Noland, Moran, & Kotschwar, 2016, 4). In the US, women are only about 5% of the leaders of the Fortune 500 companies (Catalyst, 2017). Women are absent at the top of the film industry: “In 2014, 85% of films had no female directors, 80% had no female writers.” (Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, 2015). In the US, only about a quarter of University Presidents are women (as of 2014) (Lapovsky, 2014). Across a variety of spheres, it seems that women are “absent” from the corridors of power at the highest level, in spite of decades of contestation.

The #metoo campaign has created a public discussion about the problems associated with the ubiquity of male dominance in the United States. As the #metoo campaign has revealed a widespread sexism in the news media, observers have linked sexist media coverage to sexual harassment in the industry: It might seem that newspaper reporters engaged in sexist coverage that resulted in electing a sexist man (Filipovic, 2017). Moreover, the men who run the country (dominating legislatures and boardrooms) seem unlikely to adopt policies to address these issues. How can women or other advocates for sexual equality challenge a system where every sphere is characterized by male dominance?

Some observers have argued that the solution to the problem has been to elect more women, to get more women into positions of power. This intuitively sensible response has some basis in reality. For example, recent coverage of Sweden’s feminist foreign policy has linked it to the Swedish foreign minister’s own experience of violence in intimate relationships. Indeed, in general there is a link between women in government and policies to benefit women and children (such as childcare and maternity leave). On this view, if we have more women in office, more women making movies, and more women running tech companies, the problems of sexual harassment and sexism more generally will disappear. But it is important to keep in mind that the current severity and pervasiveness of sexual harassment has shocked those who assumed that having more women in the workplace would put an end to ‘Mad Men’ era antics. As another wave of contestation arises, with women and men expressing disgust at the behavior of “powerful men” and some observers pointing hopefully to “generational change,” it is a good time to review what feminist political science tells us about gender and power, what this teaches us about power in general, and how these insights have enriched political science.

Feminist social scientists have shown that the relationship between gender and power is far more complex than this “powerful men” approach suggests. Women can be violent and sexist, and women in power do not always adopt feminist policies. Gender cannot be separated from class, race and other dimensions of power (Hancock, 2016; Collins & Bilge, 2016). Moreover, sometimes men do adopt feminist policies. In fact, given that most Parliaments in the world are male dominated, we need a more sophisticated account of political power and political change if we want to explain why some countries have more feminist policies than others. We need an account of power that helps us to understand why change sometimes seems to come from the bottom-up, and why women and men leaders sometimes lead - and sometimes resist - change (Celsis, Childs, Kantola, & Krook, 2008; Htun & Weldon, 2018). Feminist political scientists can tell us a great deal about the obstacles to change: It’s not just about changing the bodies at the top, and it is not just about changing the formal rules (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Mackay & Waylen, 2014). Indeed, a feminist understanding of power points to the importance of civil society and broader social norms as a potential area for resistance and empowerment (Lloyd, 2013; Young, 1990; Weldon, 2011, 2017a,b). The study of gender inequality has required feminist political scientists to develop new ways to understand power, ideas that have implications for understanding important political phenomena such as representation and exclusion. These concepts bring informal politics into the formal sphere and show the limits of a formal, top-down approach to politics more generally.

2. Feminist scholarship in political science

The study of politics, conceptually, can have a very broad remit. Some influential definitions of politics focus on power: Dahl (1984) defined politics as relating to power, and political systems as “any persistent pattern of human relationships that involves, to a significant extent, control, influence, power or authority” (p. 9–10). Other definitions of politics emphasize distributions and normative (meaning value-laden) considerations, as in “who gets what, when, how” (Lasswell, 1936) or the authoritative allocation of value (Easton, 1953). These broad conceptual definitions would seem to undergird a very broad field of study, encompassing cultural and sexual politics, poverty and inequality, and persistent imperialism. In practice, the study of politics has tended to be narrower. Some traditional definitions of politics have explicitly taken a narrower view, defining politics as centering on the relationship of the activity to the state: Politics, narrowly construed, is the activity of government, or governing. Indeed, for Aristotle, the words polis and politikos referred to the state or political community and its leaders, respectively, sometimes translated or understood to mean of or pertaining to the state. In some ways, this is another way of saying that politics is about governing, or authoritative power. Although there are a variety of traditions in political science, a dominant thread focuses on formal institutions and the operation of government as the core of the discipline, examining elections, voting, political parties, wars and military institutions, and constitutions most frequently.

Thus, in spite of the potential for broader disciplinary boundaries,
political science has tended to focus more narrowly on questions of government and the state and on formal rules and institutions to the detriment of the informal or the broader social and economic context. This focus has certainly had its critics within political science more generally. Indeed, from the behavioral revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, to “bringing the state back in” in the late 1970s and 80s, political science as a discipline has long been riven between those who would emphasize institutional elements of politics and those who see institutional phenomena as epiphenomenal to the underlying social or economic relations.11

Feminist political science exploded just after this period, in the 1980s and 1990s. In political science, feminist scholarship addressed issues that are core to the discipline, with scholars showing that a broader focus on sexuality and gender helped to understand war and militarism (e.g. Enloe, 2014; Enloe, 1983; Caprioli, 2000, 2003; Elshair, 1982b, 1987; representation (Mansbridge, 1999; Phillips, 1995; Young, 1990), elections and political parties (Beckwith, 1985; Carroll, 1994; Gidengil, 1996; Thomas, 1996; Norris & Lovenduski, 1993, 1995), support for free trade agreements (Gidengil, 1995); and associated with the largest numbers of women in elective o
gender relations, examining which kinds of electoral systems were a-

sidered suitable for democracy (Paxton, 2000; Waylen, 1994). These scholars showed how gender and sexuality shaped long-established, bread and butter issues of political science. In the 1990s, feminist po-

tical scientists also examined the ways that formal institutions shaped gender relations, examining which kinds of electoral systems were associated with the largest numbers of women in elective office (Matland, 1993; Matland & Studlar, 1996; Phillips, 1995), and studying the prolif-

eration of formal institutions aimed at promoting the status of women (such as women’s policy machineries) (Stetson & Mazur, 1995) and women and development (Goetz, 1997). This included examining how state law and policy affected sexual subordination, such as violence against women (Elman, 1996). This body of work mostly did not contest the focus on the state, but it did show how gender was central to the operation of the state, and how gender refracted state action.

Alongside these scholars who revealed the gendered nature of the state and politics, even conventionally understood, developed another stream of feminist work that pushed the boundaries of the discipline itself, expanding the definition of the political and revealing the oper-

ation of power in areas thought to be outside the discipline: in families, in sexual matters, in personal or private interactions, and in civil society, culture or informal politics more generally (Butler, 2011; Okin, 1989; Enloe, 1996; Young, 1990). Feminist scholars showed how broader social and economic processes were fundamental to processes of institutional reform and electoral politics (Beckwith, 1992; Stetson & Mazur, 1995; McBride & Mazur, 2010; Majic, 2013; Mackay, Penny, & Chappell, 2010; Moghadam, 2008), suggesting that a narrow focus on “government” misses much of the operation of power in modern societies (Waylen, 1994). The social structures through which power flows are not confined to the public, electoral system, to political parties, or even to the market (Young, 1990). Norms and stereotypes advantage some and disadvantage others in intimate matters (Millet, 1970; Young, 1990; Coole, 2013); in the family (Okin 1989), and in myriad other contexts12 - a central position captured by the feminist slogan “The personal is the political” (Millet, 1970). Thus, feminist scholars pointed to the family and the body as key arenas where power operated. Feminists working in international relations showed how the sex trade undermined militarism (Enloe, 2014; Enloe, 1983), economic development (Hill, 1993) and processes of international integration (Elman, 1996, 2007). Indeed, as Enloe (2014 [1989]) has argued, the personal is not only the political - it is also the international. An expansive literature on women’s movements showed the importance of women’s movements not only for advancing gender equality,13 but also for democracy (Waylen, 1994; Banaszak, Beckwith, & Rucht, 2003; Basu, 2010; Beckwith, 2000).

Together with scholars working primarily on race, class and sexuality (Marx, 1998; Piven & Cloward, 1971; McAdam, Costain, & McFarland, 1995; Butler & Gender, 1990), feminist scholars have emphasized the ways that identities, the social meaning of bodies, link institutions to broader social and economic processes (Waylen, Celis, Kantola, & Weldon, 2013; Coole, 2013). These broader social categories of race, gender, sexuality and class (among others) intersect in complex ways, both in terms of identities and structures.14 In both feminist and mainstream political science, scholars now start from the point that social structures and formal institutions are linked to the social, informal realm, to personal connections or “social capital,” to civil society and to economic relationships (Young, 1990, 2002; Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1994; Gidengil, Goodyear-Grant, Nevitte, Blais, & Nadeau, 2003). Indeed, since the 1990s, the conventional wisdom, influenced by feminist work, has pointed to the ways that social forces and institutions combined to shape political outcomes such as welfare states (Skocpol, 1992; Esping-Andersen, 1999) and security (Hudson, Ballif-Spanvill, Caprioli, & Emmett, 2012). Even the study of institutions itself now incorporates the study of informal elements of institutions (Chappell, 2010; Helmeke & Levitsky, 2004).

Feminists have expanded the subject matter of political science, both by showing how gender matters to the operation and impact of politics, conventionally understood, and by expanding the boundaries of what is considered political. They have also made the field more complex, challenging simple dichotomies and emphasizing connections between gender, race, class and sexuality, undermining the tendency to treat these as separate fields of endeavor in political science. This has implications for understanding power – a concept that remains central to the discipline.

As this discussion suggests, feminist research has challenged conventional understandings of power in at least three ways.15 First, the study of power cannot be confined to the study of people or positions “at the top” of the hierarchy. Feminist research showing the impact of women’s movements – in spite of women’s absence from formal positions of power - forces a reconsideration of a focus on “positions of power” (Weldon, 2002, 2011, 2017a,b). Second, feminist research has added fuel to those who argue that political analysis must go beyond a reading of the formal rules. Informal norms and practices are as important for grappling with concepts of power and authority (Chappell, 2011; Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Mackay & Waylen, 2014). Last, power operates in contexts considered private or informal as well as in public and formal affairs (Elman, 1996, 2007; Enloe, 1983), operating through norms, social identities, and bodies (Khagram, Riker, & Sikkink, 2002; Cochran, 1999; Locher & Prügl, 2001; Coole, 2013). Power can be exercised - and resisted - not just at the ballot box, but also inside patriarchal institutions such as the Church, military, and family (Katzenstein, 1991, 1995, 1999; Okin, 1989).

3. Feminist contributions to understanding power

Traditional conceptualizations of power are increasingly inadequate to cope with these insights about the operation of power. In political

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11 On the behavioral revolution in political science see Dahl (1961), Eulan (1968) and Pye (2006); On the movement to bring the state and institutions more broadly understood back into political science see Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol (1985); Skocpol (1979, 1992) and March and Olson (1989).

12 For example, in the area of sports, see Boyko and Yasuoka (2015) on health care, see Govender and Penn-Kekana (2007); On gender bias in the workplace, see World Bank (2011, chap. 5); On gender bias in neuroscience see O’Connor and Joffe (2014).

13 For a review of this literature see Weldon (2002) and Htun and Weldon (2018) especially Chapter 2.

14 The literature on intersectionality is too vast to review here for excellent recent discussions of the literature in political science and social science more generally see Hancock (2016) and Collins and Bilge (2016).

15 I do not mean to suggest that no other scholars in political science ever made these arguments, but rather, that the body of feminist work has added its collective weight and influence to expanding and pushing these critical perspectives.
science, the standard conceptualization of power includes several different ways of identifying the exercise of power - often called the “faces of power”: The first face of power is the most intuitive, capturing the capacity to change another's behavior on a particular issue: A is able to coerce B to do something that B would not otherwise do (Dahl, 1957). This face of power is sometimes seen as focusing on decision-making. The second face of power (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962) deals with non-decision-making, the power of controlling the agenda, of controlling the background conditions such that certain issues or perspectives are never discussed. The third face of power, has to do with manipulating others so that they come to believe that the things that you want to do are the things they want to do (as distinct from overt coercion) (Lukes, 2005). An example of this kind of power is the way that powerful actors encourage workers, on a Marxist view, to develop false consciousness, to obscure what is in their interests and to emphasize the desirability of behaviors that accord with the wishes of the powerful. Each of these approaches to power, however, focuses on how some people - individuals, groups or classes - have the agency and capacity to dominate others.

Feminist theorists, however, have moved beyond even this third face of the exercise of power to understand power less as something someone possesses and more as a relationship (Young, 1990; Lloyd, 2013). The “distribution” of power approach understands power as something like an amount that can be distributed across people - some thing that they have. Critics of this view argue that power is in the process that produces these unequal outcomes, to be sure, but power is not best captured by thinking of it as stuff to be given out or possessed (Young, 1990). Power in modern society, feminists have argued, is not something one can pick up, put down, choose to exercise or not to exercise. Power flows through us by virtue of our social identity and institutional position whether or not we wish to “exercise power.” On the other hand, we may be silenced by these same identities and social positions in other contexts.

The feminist approach to power points out that some bodies will be perceived as exercising more authority and as commanding more status regardless of whether anyone chooses to exercise that power. Power structures all relationships to a variety of degrees, and understanding the ubiquity of power is part of what is meant by the feminist slogan, “the personal is the political.” Power structures the relationship between the First World consumer and the developing world sweatshop worker, though they may never meet. Power structures the relationship between the police officer and the person of color in multilayered ways. Power structures the relationships between parents and teachers and children, between husbands and wives, between lovers. There is no “choice” to the “exercise” of power in these relationships.

On this view, then, power is less of a thing that inheres in particular people, or even in particular offices, and more of a set of relationships and background forces that are present throughout society. Power is “productive,” generating “identities, subject positions, forms of life, and behavioral habits in accordance with particular norms” (Lloyd, 2013, 125). Power that stems from norms, from ideas about legitimacy and appropriateness, is sometimes called “soft power” (Khagram, Riker, & Sikkink, 2002). The omnipresence of power as a relationship even structures our efforts to seek truth and knowledge. Knowledge claims themselves are hopelessly entwined in relations of power, structuring relations of domination and oppression (Lloyd, 2013).

Recognizing the ways that these relations of power depend on the compliance of the seemingly powerless, of everyday people, is important not only for understanding how power works, but also for identifying possible sites of resistance (Enloe, 1996). If bureaucratic systems, for example, depend on compliance with bureaucratic rules, then failing to comply with those rules can disrupt systems. If economic systems depend on people being willing to work, for example, then workers retain the power to disrupt those systems by withdrawing their labor, for example in a strike. Women have the power to disrupt systems that depend on their unpaid labor, and to draw attention to their contribution, by refusing to do that labor. In the supermarket strike, women in Iceland disrupted supermarkets by jamming up the works when they refused to pay more than part of the cost of their groceries, citing the wage gap that contributed to devaluing women’s work (Kaplan, 1992). The original treehuggers, the women of the Chipko movement, disrupted development by refusing to move out of the path of the construction machinery that came to knock down trees (Calman, 1989). Women’s threats to withdraw their business as consumers in the United States have moved institutions that previously ignored sexual harassment and assault to deal with perpetrators more effectively. This ability to disrupt systems through which power runs is fundamental to the power of protest in modern life. In this sense, the collective power of those at the “bottom” of the hierarchy should not be overlooked, as doing so only further empowers those at the “top,” making their domination seem inevitable and inalterable. Indeed, revealing or highlighting these ‘powers of the powerless’ is a critical dimension of empowerment, part of raising consciousness about the collective power of non-compliance (Carroll, 1972).

Finding ways to challenge gender bias, the formal and informal practices that maintain gender hierarchy in everyday life has been called “everyday politics” (Katzenstein, 1995; Mansbridge, 1995). Social structures create forms of subjectivity, forms of consciousness and identity, that encourage the powerless to accept their subordinate position and that make the privileging of advantaged groups seem seamless and natural. Overcoming these forms of consciousness takes concerted collective action, the formation of an oppositional consciousness (Mansbridge, 2001). Forming such an oppositional consciousness might be seen as part of a process of decolonizing the mind, pushing back on the ways that social structures keep us powerless by reinforcing disempowering versions of the self (Fanon, 1961).

Effective challenges to structures of power will be collective, working at a macro level, rather than individual, even if these macro strategies work through the transformation of a multitude of individual actions. These challenges to power are called empowerment, an important feminist conceptual contribution that considers power from a more constructive angle (Lloyd, 2013). Empowerment, then, in the feminist sense, is a collective phenomenon, requiring collective action on a wide array of dimensions. Moghadam and Senfotova (2005), for example, define women’s empowerment as: “a multi-dimensional process of civil, political, social, economic, and cultural participation and rights” and conceptualize “empowerment in terms of the achievement of basic capabilities, of legal rights, and of participation in key social, economic, and political domains” requiring policy and legal changes. While many contemporary critics point to an increasing tendency to see empowerment in individualistic, depoliticized terms (Arutyunova & Clark, 2014), feminist theorists and analysts have long emphasized the collective, political nature of empowerment. Keller and Mbewwe (1991) define empowerment as “a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination.” This element of organizing or collective action is critical to feminist accounts of how empowerment counters domination. Empowerment in the feminist sense encompasses both the individual level dimensions of increased agency and the broader efforts to secure the societal conditions that make individual agency possible and meaningful. As Young puts it, “empowerment refers to the development of a sense of collective influence over the social conditions of one’s life. ... includes both personal empowerment and collective empowerment and suggests that the latter is a condition of the former” (Young, 1994).

Such collective action is complicated by the ways that axes of social domination intersect each other, making the concept of intersectionality
very important for understanding power (Ackerly & True, 2008). For example, women’s movements in the United States have had to confront relations of racial domination among women (hooks, 1999; Roth, 2004), and the civil rights movement in the United States, a movement for racial justice, was riven by class and gender as well as race (Simien, 2011). Although solidarity among oppressed groups is critical to change, to their power and empowerment, it remains difficult to achieve (Rai, 2018; Einwohner et al., 2017). Feminists of color writing in political science have insisted on the centrality of power to ideas of intersectionality, and vice versa (Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Bilge, 2013).

There are multiple sites of power, and power works through all of us in a multitude of ways. In order to understand how women are excluded and marginalized - and yet, not powerless - we have to understand all the different ways and sites where power operates. We have to look at all the ways power operates to see women’s power, as well as to understand why male domination persists. More generally, we want to consider these dimensions and sites of power in all analyses of politics. In other words, the feminist analysis of power not only helps us understand gender inequality and male domination, it gives us a deeper understanding of power, a core concept of our discipline, and suggests that we expand our disciplinary vocabulary to include empowerment.

The smooth operation of bureaucratic, social, political and economic systems depends on women’s compliance (Enloe, 1996). If they organize, women can use their collective power in these realms to make a difference. The connective tissue of such collective efforts can inhere in social networks that may not appear to be oriented towards the state - towards social, cultural and community activities (Weldon, 2004). This helps to explain why women’s organizing in civil society - women’s movements - are an effective avenue of empowerment for women. In addition, it helps us understand how informal institutions, norms, can be a source of power. Ideas about appropriateness and legitimacy can undergird “soft power,” sources of influence that inhere in ideas (Horn, 2010, 2013; Khagram, Riker, & Sikkink, 2002). Thus, power and identity are closely linked, something feminists have pointed out in their critiques of constructivist approaches to international relations (Locher & Prügl, 2001). Collective action in civil society can not only result in changing formal laws and policies that affect women and other marginalized groups (Weldon, 2011), it can also change norms, and informal institutions (Raymond, Laurel Weldon, Kelly, Arriaga, & Clark, 2013).

If we move beyond an understanding of political power that sees it as equivalent to formal office holding in the state, we can see the way power operates in civil society, the market, the family and in intimate and interpersonal affairs. We can see informal aspects of power as well as power that depends on formal rules. We can also see the possibilities for resistance and empowerment in all these sites. This focus on revealing possibilities for empowerment is an important and original contribution of feminist scholarship to political science. It not only helps us understand how women, as a subaltern group, are able to challenge fairly entrenched forms of male domination, it helps understand the operation of power - and possibilities of resistance - more generally.17

4. What feminist political science offers women’s studies

Feminist social science, I have argued, has made important innovations in political science. Conversely, in this section, I argue that feminist political science also offers some important insight into gender inequality not found in other areas of feminist inquiry. Although, as I have argued above, political science needs to broaden its disciplinary focus to encompass phenomena other than formal institutions, feminist scholars need a deep understanding of formal institutions and the operation of government, and how these phenomena relate to informal practices and norms. Understanding formal institutions is important for understanding the persistence and form of gender inequality and the possibilities for transformative change.

The contribution of feminist political science is brought into sharp relief when we seek to understand differences in state action with respect to gender equality - over time, across countries, and in different domains (say, domestic and international action). In each area, institutions are critical for understanding changes in policy that are crucial for women’s survival and equality, and indeed for gender equality more generally. For example, take access to abortion in Canada and the United States. Canada has the most expansive legal access to abortion in the world (Htun & Weldon, 2018). In the United States, formal legal access is similarly broad, but in practice, effective access is much more difficult, with some 90% of counties in the United States lacking an abortion provider (on differences between legal and practical access, see Blofield, 2008; Blofield & Haas, 2013). What explains the expansive access to abortion in these contexts, a policy outcome that is similar to some extent? And how can we account for dramatic disjuncture, in the US, between actual access and practical access, an outcome that is far more divergent than the differences in formal legal access?

Feminist political scientists have pointed to the role of feminist movements, and how they shape, by formal political institutions (Banaszak et al., 2003; McAdam et al., 1998; Weldon, 2002, 2011; Htun & Weldon, 2018). This approach helps to understand the similarities and differences in abortion politics above. In both Canada and the US, the influence of an active women’s movement helps to explain the longevity of women’s abortion rights in spite of efforts to overturn or undermine abortion. For example, the Canadian abortion law was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1988 (R v. Morgentaler). Efforts to replace the law were widely, and successfully, protested by feminists. Unexpected defections from the Conservative party resulted in a narrow and unusual Senate vote against a replacement law (Haussman, 2001). But the combination of protest and embarrassing political defeat has meant that explicit efforts to undermine abortion rights have been less common in recent years.

Of course, there are important differences between Canada and the United States as well. Canada is a very secular country, while the United States is one of the most religious of the advanced industrial states. In the United States, there is a strong, formal division between religion and law. This prevents societal religiosity from permeating state action to the degree it might in a context where religion and state authority are more fused (Htun & Weldon, 2018). Indeed, in an analysis of 70 countries from 1975 to 2005, Htun and Weldon (2015) find that it is the interaction of religiosity with formal institutions that determines women’s reproductive rights in terms of formal laws on the books. And active women’s movements, women in government, and other civil society groups in both countries use these formal guarantees to contest efforts to alter formal policy on women’s reproductive rights (Htun and Weldon, 2015).

Formal institutions may mute the impact of societal religiosity on women’s formal rights to reproductive freedom, but they do not block this impact as effectively when it comes to societal practice. Religious groups work hard to obstruct women’s access to abortion through all the informal means at their disposal, electing abortion opponents to hospital boards, protesting the provision of abortion services, and prioritizing the election of candidates to office who will oppose and undermine abortion rights at every opportunity. Abortion providers are harassed and their families threatened. In contrast, in Canada, where Catholicism is the single largest denomination, religiosity is much less pronounced: For example, in Canada, a much greater proportion of the public (57%) say religion is unimportant in their lives compared to the United States (34%) (Grabtree, 2010). While access to abortion varies across the country, it is provided at public expense in many jurisdictions (something expressly forbidden by the Hyde Amendment in the United States).

17 I am particularly grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this specific formulation of the point.
United States), and harassment of abortion providers is much less prevalent (Norman et al., 2016). So formal institutional differences interact with societal religiosity to shape access to abortion. Understanding formal as well as societal differences, and the way they interact, is an important contribution of feminist political science to the understanding of gender inequality and its variation in degree and form across different national contexts.19

Comparing electoral outcomes across these two countries (Canada and the United States) illustrates the ways that political science can help feminist activists to understand when and why they are likely to find allies (however imperfect) in elective office, and the gender issues and groups of women upon which these elections are most likely to have an immediate impact. Canada and the United States both rank very highly on measures of gender equality and have adopted very similar policies in most areas of women’s rights (with exception of the abortion policy mentioned above (Htun & Weldon, 2018)). About two-thirds of both Canadians and Americans say they support the women’s movement. But in the most recent election, Canadians selected a self-proclaimed feminist as a national leader, while in the United States the defeat of the first-ever woman to secure the nomination of one of the two major parties came at the hands of a man who pledged that women should be punished for having abortions, that sexual harassment could be handled by women themselves if they toughened up, and who was widely known to have bragged about grabbing women sexually against their will at the time of election. How could election outcomes be so different in two countries where the women’s movement has roughly equal support and women’s rights in formal law look so similar?

It’s a complicated story, but an important part of the story is about political parties and how they align with feminist policy priorities. In the US, Trump supporters (overwhelmingly Republican voters) were distinguished from their Democratic counterparts by attitudes of hostile sexism and racial resentment, and by their differences in preferences related to abortion. Trump, a Republican, was the anti-Obama, who was endorsed in 2008 by the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL), sponsored the Lilly Ledbetter Equal Pay Act, and was generally seen as a traditional Democrat in his support for women’s rights. While many have pointed out that Trump is not a typical republican in many respects (for example, opposing free trade) when it comes to gender, Trump cleaved fairly closely to traditional Republican positions - opposing abortion, favoring deregulation of the workplace over laws advancing sexual equality, and working to roll back advances in equality for sexual minorities. In Canada, Trudeau, a leader of the Liberal party, replaced the conservative Harper government that opposed abortion and ignored violence against missing and murdered indigenous women. As Bashevkin (2009) argues, after 1993 socially conservative men and women, who opposed feminist advances and affirmed traditional roles for women, became more influential, particularly in Harper’s Conservative Party. Running against the incumbent Conservatives in 2015, and competing with NDP leader Thomas Mulcair, to be seen as the most appealing alternative to the unpopular incumbent, Liberal-leader Justin Trudeau embraced feminism. The social democratic NDP would traditionally have been seen as the strongest advocate for feminist policies (Bashevkin, 2009), but Trudeau muddied the waters: In addition to his self-identification as a feminist, he pledged on the campaign trail to appoint a Cabinet that was more representative of women, and that would take violence against indigenous women more seriously, among other priorities.

The alignment of political parties with specific women’s rights issues and feminist identities or conservative sex roles helps to explain why elections produced such different outcomes, and such different subsequent patterns of action on the part of these two, male national leaders. Moreover, Trump’s electoral success, which he managed in spite of obtaining many million fewer votes than his feminist, female competitor, is largely due to the formal rules, of the US electoral college. This mechanism for determining the outcomes of Presidential elections weights sparsely populated, rural states more heavily than urban states with larger, more diverse populations, resulting in a divergence in popular vote and votes obtained in the electoral college, which selects the President. If the US had Canada’s electoral system, which gives greater weight to the populous central provinces of Ontario and Quebec, the outcome would have looked much different.

So, in very broad strokes, the different institutional systems – the electoral systems and political parties - explain important differences in state action with respect to gender equality domestically. Women’s movements enjoying broad support from the populace bring partisan differences with respect to women’s rights to the forefront, creating electoral pressure on elected officials to deliver on campaign promises to advance women’s rights (Weldon, 2011). These electoral pressures are channeled through political parties, with institutions in the United States offering additional electoral leverage to the rural and southern states where conservative gender roles are more prevalent.

The same institutional explanations can also help to explain the current apparent divergence in stated policy preferences in the areas of foreign policy with respect to women’s rights in Canada and the United States. As noted, both countries rank highly with respect to gender equality and women’s rights domestically (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Htun & Weldon, 2018), both have similar levels of support for the women’s movements, and both have male heads of state. However, they vary dramatically when it comes to foreign policy: Canada has joined Sweden in making gender equality - a feminist foreign policy - an explicit commitment of their foreign policy. For example, in June, Canada, announced a “feminist international assistance policy” hailed as a “game changer” by Nobel Laureate Leymah Gbowee, and though some pro-life groups criticized the move as “shipping abortion around the world,” the main criticism came from Canadian feminist groups arguing that this move did not go far enough because it did not sufficiently increase the funds dedicated to women’s rights. The US, in contrast, has never signed the main women’s rights convention - The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and recently reversed funding for International Planned Parenthood.

In addition to the differences elucidated above, which explain the partisan and ideological pressures on the national governments of these two countries, we should also consider some institutional differences with respect to the place of foreign policy in each national system. In the United States, foreign policy is the one area where the President has a freer hand to express policy priorities, so it is a relatively easy place to demonstrate policy changes. In addition, in issue-areas where women’s rights that have become equated with partisan differences, like reproductive rights in the United States (Sanbonmatsu, 2003) or family law in the Middle East (Moghadam, 2012), women’s rights become a symbolic area of immediate importance in the aftermath of elections. This is why the Mexico-city rule - also known as the global gag rule - is instantiated and repealed with every time the administration changes with respect to political party. The Mexico city or global gag rule is the executive order of the US President that prohibits public funding for international groups (that is, operating outside the U.S.) that provide information about abortion. In the United States, elections take place in November and the government changes in January. The January

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18 For an overview of the history and impact of the Hyde Amendment, see Adashi and Orchigross (2017).
19 There is not space here for a robust discussion of the definition of gender and gender equality and how it relates to concepts of sex, gender and women, but I refer the reader to Htun and Weldon (2018) for a discussion of these definitional issues that helps explain the usage in this piece.
20 Gbowee quoted in Harris (2017); For an example one pro-life group’s criticism see Christen (2017); The policy was also criticized by feminist and development groups for not representing an increase in funds, though other groups pointed out that a focus on funding distracted from the long-term commitments to take funding for women to 90% of development funding and the progress that an explicit commitment to feminism made.
anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, an important case regarding abortion in the United States, provides a symbolic opportunity for elected leaders to show that “elections have consequences” and to deliver on promises about reproductive rights. This year, just days into his Presidency, President Trump reinstated the “global gag rule,” a policy with ramifications for women all over the world. It adds further restrictions to those that already constrain the use of government funds for abortion: No US government funding may be used for the provision of abortion, as described above, a consequence of the Hyde amendment domestically, and its predecessor the 1973 Helms amendment which applies the same rule to foreign assistance. The global gag rule further prevents international NGOs from using their own funds to offer abortions or even to refer women to other organizations that offer abortion. It also prevents health workers in foreign countries from advocating for abortion rights, including a prohibition on testifying about the impacts of illegal abortion (Redden, 2017). In the past, reinstating the global gag rule has caused a major contraceptive supply crisis in Ethiopia. This time around, an international planned Parenthood Federal representative in Nepal described the expected impact of the cuts in this way:

Funding cuts would mean we can’t support ... the government of Nepal’s effort on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Additionally we would not be able to run community clinics or mobile health days or train healthcare workers. The impact also means we would lose essential medical staff like nurses, doctors and health experts (cited in Redden, 2017).

The reinstatement of the Mexico-city rule – and the later expansion of these prohibitions - has had the effect desired by the Republican leaders by whom it was championed. Anti-abortion groups noted the action approvingly, commenting that “President Trump is continuing Ronald Reagan’s legacy by taking immediate action on day one to stop the promotion of abortion through our tax dollars overseas,” adding that the action “sends a strong signal about his administration’s pro-life priorities.”

Again, electoral institutions that produced these national leaders in Canada and the United States, and the way they respond to popular mobilization in social movements and as participants in electoral processes, also shape state action on women’s rights abroad, with significant consequences for the world’s women. Women’s movements domestically interact with the structure of the party system and other political institutions to shape state action on gender issues. Understanding the dynamics behind this state action are critical for understanding the role that political institutions do and could play in reinforcing or undermining male dominance. In this way, political science can contribute to our understanding of core questions for women’s studies, questions about whether the “Master’s Tools” can ever dismantle the “Master’s House” (Lorde, 1984). In order to develop a feminist theory of the state that can inform feminist praxis we must grapple with the complexities and variations in state action across institutions and across different groups of women (Mackinnon, 1991; Kantola, 2006; Htun, 2004, 2005; Weldon, 2017a,b; Htun & Weldon, 2018; Hancock, 2016; Jayawardena, 1986).

5. Feminism and political science: dialogue and innovation

In conclusion then, the reciprocal influence of feminist scholarship and political science has been one of mutual enrichment. Feminists have contributed to a broadening of the understanding of power, a core concept of Political Science, while political scientists can help understand how formal and informal institutions combine with social movements to contest or reinforce the persistence of male domination, gender inequality or patriarchy, core concepts for women’s studies. The contribution of feminist political science to the broader discipline has been limited, however, by male bias that leads scholars to overlook and discount work by women in the discipline. Feminist work is disproportionately done by women, but the discipline’s main journals and other disciplinary institutions underrepresent women (e.g., Maliniak, Powers, & Walter, 2013). As Mershon and Walsh note: “Recent research into gendered citation patterns in international relations journals, moreover, shows that research produced by women is read and cited less often than is research by men, which means that this research is ‘systematically undervalued’”, which means that this research is “systematically undervalued” (Mershon & Walsh, 2016 463; see also Mershon & Walsh, 2015). On-going efforts by women in the discipline to extract concessions from major scholarly associations and journals may help advance this work and help the discipline of political science realize its full potential (Brown, Htun, & Rosenbluth, 2016).

Where the tools of political science and feminist scholarship work together, these approaches can deepen our understanding of contemporary feminist politics. Returning to the example with which we started this essay, these approaches allows us a deeper understanding and more nuanced assessment of the likely impact of the “#metoo” campaign which has been spreading across the United States and beyond. How can powerful men be removed by (powerless) women? Feminist political science shows us that women are not powerless when collectively empowered, and it helps us to understand the operation of both power and empowerment. It also helps us understand the limits of a campaign that focuses on removing “powerful men” from formal, high-profile positions of influence. Feminist understanding of power and patriarchy tells us that removing these powerful men, while it may catalyze broader processes of social transformation, will not, alone or in itself, solve the problem of sexual harassment or advance equality for women. Instead, the pervasive nature of sexual harassment revealed by the “#metoo” campaign brings into sharp relief the need to change social norms and practices, as well as the law.

Moreover, it highlights the ways that differentiated strategies may be needed to address the impact of sexual harassment on women of different racial, ethnic or class groups. For example, feminist observers have pointed out that no one is likely to start a social media campaign to bring down the creepy night manager at the local fast food joint - though they could do so (Slaughter, 2017). The frequency of sexual harassment for working class women makes clear that the problem cannot be seen as a matter of a few problematic actors: A 2016 survey of hotel workers in Chicago revealed that “58% of hotel workers and 77% of casino workers surveyed have been sexually harassed by a guest.” Similarly, #metoo accusations against men of color in office prompted more discussion of the issues that surround the motto “believe women” when it comes to complaints of sexual assault against African American men, complaints that were often used as a pretext for horrific sexual violence of a different kind (lynching). It is often forgotten that African American women, too, were victims of lynching, with some 150 women lynched between 1880 and 1965. Lynching, sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women of color inside the civil rights movement illustrates how intersecting axes of power - of race, class and gender - uniquely construct violence against women of color, as women (Simien, 2011). Those seeking social transformation must offer new visions, new models of social practice that better reflect sexual equality and racial justice in the workplace, family, intimate relationships, criminal justice system, church or mosque and elsewhere if they want to do more than create a revolving door at the top of a hierarchical system that continues to privilege men and the masculine, if they want to advance the anti-oppression principle at the heart of

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21 Marjorie Dannenfelser, President of the anti-abortion political advocacy group Susan B Anthony List cited in Redden (2017).

feminism (hooks, 2000; Young, 1990). Feminist political science shows the importance of both collective and individual, agentic and structural, dimensions of empowerment and affirms the important of organizing and collective action as a manifestation of this form of power.

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