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Revealing the “Secret Garden”: The Informal Dimensions of Political Recruitment

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Candidate selection and recruitment has been notably described as the “secret garden” of politics—an obscure process, often hidden from view, that is regulated largely by internal party rules, informal practices, and power relationships (cf. Gallagher and Marsh 1988). In this contribution, we contend that informal party practices and their gendered consequences are critically important for understanding the continuity of male political dominance and female underrepresentation. Rather than make a strict separation between formal and informal rules in the recruitment process, we argue that gender politics scholars must instead identify and empirically investigate the specific combinations of such rules that impact upon women’s and men’s political participation in parties. The proposed approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the bounded nature and variable outcomes of institutional innovation and party change.

Identifying Formal and Informal Rules of Recruitment

Recent research in the gender politics field has focused increasingly on political recruitment, pointing to the candidate selection process as a crucial area in need of further investigation and research (see, for example, Bjarnegård 2013; Hinojosa 2012; Kenny 2013). Yet, these studies also highlight the particular difficulties of obtaining detailed and reliable information about the “shadowy pathways” prior to election, drawing attention to the slippage between the formal rules of the selection process and the real world to which they are supposed to apply. Formal rules are consciously designed and specified in writing (Lowndes 2014). The fact that formal rules exist, however, does not necessarily imply that the actual recruitment process will mirror these party regulations. Many political parties have detailed rules “on the books” that are not followed. Indeed, the rapidly expanding literature on candidate gender quotas provides numerous examples

of countries and parties failing to meet formal targets for the selection and election of female candidates, highlighting that the effectiveness of these measures largely depends on the willingness of party elites to implement and enforce quota measures (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005). Party regulations may therefore tell us very little about actual recruitment processes on the ground.

As such, researchers need to move beyond the formal dimensions of the political recruitment process to look more explicitly at the role of informal rules, norms, and practices in shaping behavior and outcomes. The informal rules of the recruitment process, however, are much more difficult to identify. Indeed, as Helmke and Levitsky (2004) note, informal rules are often defined too broadly, encompassing any behavior that is not written down. As such, these authors advocate a more precise definition of informal rules as “socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels” (Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 727). They are, therefore, generally not open to public scrutiny or demands for reform. Research in the gender and politics field provides ample evidence that many informal rules are also *gendered*—in other words, they prescribe and proscribe “acceptable” masculine and feminine forms of behavior, rules, and values for men and women within institutions (Chappell 2006, 226). For example, Puwar (2004) draws attention to the ways in which women representatives in the House of Commons are expected to both “do” the performance of an MP—which is coded as masculine—while also “managing” their femininity.

Understanding and explaining the persistence of male power in politics is thus a challenge that requires unveiling the gendered expectations implicitly inherent in different informal rules for recruitment. The invisible byproduct of men’s domination of political

institutions and public life has been their ability to set the “rules of the game.” As a result, political parties as we know them are deeply gendered organizations (Lovenduski 2005). Gender politics scholarship provides ample evidence of the multiple ways in which these organizations disadvantage women, but we also need to investigate and specify the mechanisms through which male political dominance is maintained (Bjarnegård 2013). This includes exposing the masculine biases of the recruitment process and identifying the advantages that are reserved for (certain) men, even when such advantages are neither recognized, nor desired (Hanmer 1990). For example, the informal networks that often play a crucial role in the political recruitment process continue to be dominated by men (see also Verge in this volume). In many countries, for example, a strong clientelist network is an informal prerequisite for becoming a candidate—what matters, if you want to get a seat, is who you know (see for example Bjarnegård 2013; Franceschet and Piscopo 2014). Yet, these informal “rules of the game” have gendered consequences, as women are far less likely to be in strategic positions with access to the resources needed to build and maintain these networks, make political careers, and gain electoral power.

Dynamic Configurations of Formalization and Institutionalization

Difficult as it may be to identify and pin down the formal and informal rules for recruitment, revealing this “secret garden” requires a deeper investigation of the *interaction* between the formal and informal rules of the game. Rather than look at formal and informal rules as separate and contrasting elements of the institutional landscape, we need to consider a continuum from highly formal to highly informal, with many places in between. On the one hand, informal rules may reinforce change, ensuring that formal procedures are actually complied with. For instance,

parties that have had informal arrangements for alternating male and female names on candidate lists are more likely to effectively implement a legal candidate quota. On the other hand, informal conventions may actually override formal rule changes or exist alongside formal arrangements as a parallel institutional framework (Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Reiser 2014). As such, changes in formal rules—for example, through the introduction of gender quotas—may not necessarily translate into changes in the day-to-day practices of political recruitment (Kenny 2013).

An additional analytical category is the degree of institutionalization of the rules in place (Reiser 2014; Siavelis and Morgenstern 2008). For example, subjective informal selection criteria can be informally institutionalized within political parties in that they are widely known, accepted, and enforced within a network of institutional actors, whereas formal selection criteria may be written down but not always institutionalized and implemented.

A more useful and dynamic formulation, then, is the distinction between “rules-in-form” (or formal rules, *de jure* rules) and “rules-in-use” (*de facto* rules)—that is, the distinctive mix of “do’s and don’ts that one learns on the ground” (Ostrom 1999, 38; see also Mackay 2014). When “rules-in-form” correspond to the “rules-in-use,” there are formally institutionalized (often called bureaucratized) rules for political recruitment. If such rules specify clear and measurable eligibility criteria for candidates, outline the steps of the process, and make it clear where formal decisions are taken, written regulations do take us a long way. Informally institutionalized rules, on the other hand, *de facto* guide the process on the ground, although the rules are unlikely to be put in writing. Albeit diverging from formal rules, informally institutionalized rules about candidate selection provide selectors with well-established and shared informal criteria for what

a suitable candidate should be like, what such a person needs to do, and who s/he should know in order to be selected (Freidenberg and Levitsky 2006).

Rather than positing formal and informal rules as opposites, then, we contend that it is more helpful to look for dynamic and changing processes of formalization and institutionalization. The “gaps” or “soft spots” that often open up between formal and informal rules can both create spaces for change and resistance in the political recruitment process (Kenny 2013). When formal rules are not actively maintained or enforced, participants in the selection process may be left with considerable leeway to circumvent and subvert regulations and reforms that clash with their interests—including gender quotas. Indeed, the literature on gender and political recruitment provides ample evidence of informal party practices of quota subversion, ranging from running women in “no-hope” seats where they have little chance of winning, to practices of local patronage and the privileging of “favorite sons,” and, even, in some cases, committing electoral fraud in order to sidestep formal gender equality reforms (see, for instance, Baldez 2007; Bjarnegård 2013; Hinojosa 2012; Kenny 2013). This makes the mix of formal and informal elements in the recruitment process an empirical question, one that often requires time-consuming and field-intensive methods such as in-depth interviews and participant observation (cf. Lowndes 2014). However, such an approach is important not only to understand the role informal practices and conventions play in the selection process, but also to investigate whether formal rules and regulations *really do* structure behavior in practice.

CONCLUSION

The secret garden of politics is gradually opening up to researchers, not least because we have started to incorporate informality into our analyses. This allows us to answer questions about

who is considered a suitable candidate and why as well as what the process that determined that suitability looked like. Once we start unveiling informal rules, we also need to start asking who these informal rules serve and protect, and why. When research unravels the informal arrangements that make men recruit more men, we also understand more about what political recruitment is all about, more broadly, and where the recruitment process received its legitimacy, especially when we trace its specificities back to formal documents, informal practices, or specific combinations of the two. Therefore, we need to be wary of abandoning the analysis of formal rules for a sole focus on informal rules; instead, we must focus on different constellations of formality and institutionalization.

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