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Introduction: What We Saw at the Revolution

Women in American Politics and Political Science

Christina Wolbrecht

It is difficult now to imagine: in 1974, when Jeane Kirkpatrick and the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) conducted their groundbreaking research on female state legislators, Kirkpatrick (1974, 3) could write: "Half a century after the ratification of the nineteenth amendment, no woman has been nominated to be president or vice president, no woman has served on the Supreme Court. Today, there is no woman in the cabinet, no woman in the Senate, no woman serving as governor of a major state, no woman mayor of a major city, no woman in the top leadership of either major party."

There were a few female political elites in 1974, but only a very few: women comprised about 6 percent of all state legislators (Kirkpatrick 1974) and less than 4 percent of members of the House of Representatives (CAWP 2006). At the mass level, however, the news was more promising: the gender gap in turnout was just 2 percentage points in men's favor in 1972, almost all of which was attributed to older women (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

Clearly, great strides have been made in the past thirty-some years. In 2007, women hold sixteen percent of seats in both the House and the Senate, and almost a quarter of state legislative seats. U.S. Representative Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) was recently elected madame speaker of the House. Women serve as governors of nine states and are mayors of seven of the fifty largest U.S. cities (CAWP 2007a). Five women currently serve in cabinet-level positions in President George W. Bush's administration, and an additional thirty women – including Kirkpatrick herself! – have held cabinet-level positions since Kirkpatrick wrote her indictment (CAWP 2007b).[1] Indeed, in recent years, two women, including a woman of color, have served as secretary of state, one of the most important and prominent cabinet positions. Sandra

With apologies – and all due credit – to former Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan, author of *What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era* (Random House, 2003), which describes a different (and perhaps, counter) revolution.

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Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg sit (or, until recently, were sitting) on the Supreme Court. We have witnessed just one major party vice-presidential nominee (Geraldine Ferraro in 1984) and none for president, but at this writing a woman (Hillary Clinton, of course) is a leading contender for the top of a major-party ticket in 2008. Women have been more likely than men to register and to turn out to vote since the 1980 presidential election (MacManus 2006).

Kirkpatrick's research was inspired in part by the revolution in gender norms, expectations, and practices underway by the early 1970s. Among many other things, the second wave of the women's movement encouraged and facilitated the growing number of women entering politics at both the mass and elite levels. This was, it is important to emphasize, truly a revolution: so absurd was the concept of political women at the time of the nation's founding that most states did not bother formally to disenfranchise women but simply assumed that only men (albeit, white, propertied men) would vote (DuBois 1998). Women acted in important political ways before their enfranchisement in 1920, most notably through various social movements (see Banaszak, this volume), and often by redefining (and benefiting from redefinitions of) what was understood as political in the process (Baker 1984; Clemens 1997; Cott 1990). Yet the enactment of women's suffrage required a more-than-seventy-year struggle that achieved equal citizenship but surely not equal participation or power. Although the past thirty years have not produced full political equality for women either, they certainly have been characterized by great strides and fundamental changes to the expectations and experiences of women as political actors.

Due in large part to the work of female political scientists,[2] political science has responded to this changing political reality with a significant increase in scholarly attention to women as political actors, or what we call in this volume "political women." Women have never been completely absent from political science; related articles can be found in the flagship *American Political Science Review* (*APSR*) from its first decade, mostly regarding women's suffrage and social welfare policies directed at women.[3] Yet clearly, women and gender were not central concerns as the discipline grew and expanded in the postwar years; from 1926 to 1971, the *APSR* published just one article related to women or gender, an examination of women in national party organizations that appeared in 1944. Women gained more prominence in the *APSR* after 1971, with three articles in the 1970s, eight in the 1980s, and a whopping nineteen articles in the 1990s, with another fourteen articles appearing through May 2007, including an article on the gender politics of political science in the centennial issue (Tolleson-Rinehart and Carroll 2006).[4] Other journals have been characterized by similar trends, and often higher numbers (Kelly and Fisher 1993). In book publishing, Kirkpatrick's *Political Women* (1974) was quickly followed by a number of important books, such as Jo Freeman's *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (1975)

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and Irene Diamond's *Sex Roles in the Statehouse* (1977).[5] The trickle soon became a flood, with important works appearing in the 1980s and beyond (e.g., Baxter and Lansing 1983; Carroll 1985; Klein 1984; Mansbridge 1986, to name just a few). By the early 1990s, as many as three-quarters of all political science departments offered regular women and politics courses (Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession 2001).

Although much has changed, both in politics and in political science, the fact that progress is likely less impressive than feminist activists and scholars in 1974 hoped it would be provides important puzzles for political scientists. Although the presence of women in political office has grown, the representation of women still falls far below their 50-plus percent of the population. Women who run for office are as likely as men to win, but women remain far less likely to put themselves forward as candidates (Dolan, this volume). More women serve in legislatures, but their presence has not always been matched by a concomitant increase in power, with parties, committees, and caucuses continuing to constrain and shape women's influence (Reingold, this volume). Women now exceed men in turnout but still lag behind in terms of other forms of political participation, including donating to political campaigns and contacting a public official (Burns, this volume). Clearly, sex and gender still matter in important and consequential ways for political power and influence in the United States.

The aim of this collection, then, is to answer two questions. First, what did we – that is, political scientists – see at the revolution? In other words, what have we learned about the experiences, opportunities, constraints, and contributions of women in various political roles in the wake of the second wave and the transformation of gender roles and opportunities in the United States? And how has the experience and study of political women challenged our understandings of politics and political science? Second, where do we go from here? The quality and quantity of our scholarship on women and politics has grown by leaps and bounds, and yet there is clearly still so much work to do.

To this end, organizers Karen Beckwith, Lisa Baldez, and I asked a number of the most interesting and authoritative scholars in the subfield to provide a critical synthesis of the state of the discipline with regard to political women and American democracy some thirty years after the publication of Kirkpatrick's groundbreaking work. It is worth emphasizing at the start that, for reasons of space and time, we were unable to address a number of issues and kinds of political women, even limiting ourselves (largely) to the American case. Some categories of female political actors, such as those in the executive and judicial branches, are not examined here, although their growing numbers make this an exciting and evolving area of research. More generally, our focus on political women per se means that these essays consider just a slice of the broad, diverse, and expanding subfield focused on women and gender in political science. It is, indeed, one sign of how far women in

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politics and political science have come in the past thirty years that a volume of this size can only claim to represent a small portion of the subfield.[6]

Nonetheless, the essays in this volume address many of the most productive areas of research on American political women, including work on women as citizens, voters, participants, movement activists, partisans, candidates, and legislators. Other essays place our understanding of those roles into the context of the political theory of representation, American political development, intersectionality, and comparative politics. The contributors provide unique and important insight into both what we know and what we still need to know about how women and gender function in the American political system. The authors of these chapters do not simply recount the findings of the vast literature that has grown up in the past three-plus decades; rather, they provide frameworks for understanding and organizing that scholarship; focus attention on critical theoretical, methodological, and empirical debates; and point us all in valuable and important directions for the future of this subfield. Karen Beckwith's conclusion to the volume takes up the question of future directions directly. Here I introduce this collection by focusing on a few central themes that emerge from a review of the past thirty years of scholarship.

As the word "revolution" suggests, the concept of women as political actors is a fundamentally radical idea. For much of this nation's (and indeed, human) history, politics was – and in many ways still is – synonymous with man. For women to be recognized, permitted, and even welcomed as political actors represents a reordering of politics and a reconceptualizing of what it means to be a woman and a citizen (see Ritter, this volume). Much of this collection considers what we know and how we understand the experiences and contributions of women in traditional political roles, such as citizen, voter, candidate, and officeholder. Yet a common theme that emerges from many of the chapters is that throughout U.S. history, a signal contribution of women has been to redefine the very nature and content of politics (see Sapiro 1991a). This occurs in myriad ways: by bringing issues long considered irrelevant or unimportant to the political agenda. By creating new modes of political action and change through social movements, interest organizations, and civic engagement. By entering into traditional politics in nontraditional ways, through supposedly nonpolitical organizations, volunteer activities, and personal experience. By working within institutions to bring about gender-related change to both public policy and the political institutions themselves. To examine political women, then, requires political scientists to look beyond traditional locales, activities, and issues. In doing so, our understanding of how and why people enter active political life, how citizens shape political outcomes, and how power and influence are exercised (to name just a few subjects) becomes richer, deeper, and more complete.

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It also is clear from this literature that politics is different when women are political actors. Female citizens, voters, activists, candidates, and office-holders differ from their male counterparts in important and consequential ways, as each of these chapters details. At the same time, our contributors are appropriately judicious in their claims. As Kathleen Dolan points out in her chapter, for example, female candidates are now substantially similar to men in their ability to raise money, secure nominations, and attract votes. Female legislators behave differently, on average, from male legislators, but the differences, as Beth Reingold reminds us, are not "wide chasms." Other factors, party in particular, are often far more determinative of legislative behavior. The same factors that encourage participation among men have a similar effect on women, and men and women tend to participate in similar ways (see Burns, this volume). The similarity of female and male political actors helps put to rest the long- and widely held assumption that women are inherently apolitical and incapable of effective political action. The persistent lesser influence and power of women thus draws our attention not to deficiencies of women as political actors but to the constraints of the social, economic, and political structures in which they act (see Baldez, this volume; Hawkesworth 2005).

What this means is that although we asked our authors to write about political women, doing so necessarily required them, as it does all students of women and politics, to write about gender. That is, in most cases, our contributors were invited to analyze women per se – what we know and want to know about how women perform and experience various political roles. For the most part, then, our authors were being asked to write about "sex as a political variable" (Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997). Yet understanding the experience and actions of women in politics (and elsewhere) always requires a recognition of the pervasiveness of gender. Although the two terms are often conflated, scholars across the disciplines have long argued and observed that sex and gender are not synonymous. Sex is conventionally treated as a dichotomous variable (Beckwith 2007b), distinguishing men and women on the basis of biological traits. Gender, on the other hand, traditionally has been taken to signify the social meaning given to sexual difference.[7] Rather than dichotomous, gender is multidimensional, specific to time and context, relational, hierarchical, normative, descriptive, and, above all, complex (see Junn and Brown, this volume, on the multidimensionality and variation of gender). Gender is not a stagnant characteristic but actively and continually reproduced, reinforced, and redefined (Scott 1986). Gender attends not only to individuals but to processes, institutions, ideologies, and norms (to name but a few) as well (see, e.g., Acker 1992; Beckwith 2005, 2007; Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995a; Hawkesworth 2005; Scott 1986). Much of our existing political science research focuses on sex difference (in part because we are better at measuring sex than gender) but almost always

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with the (sometimes unstated) goal of understanding gender difference. That is, we are interested in differences between men and women because we recognize and want to understand the consequences of the social construction of gender (see, e.g., Reingold 2000).[8]

Given the close association between socially constructed masculine ideals and dominant constructions of politics and power (see Baker 1984; Brown 1988; Pateman 1994), it should not be surprising that any discussion of political women quickly entails issues of gender. Virtually all of our authors assert that a better understanding of women as political actors requires more attention to the nature, form, and consequences of the gendered expectations, institutions, and processes that shape, constrain, and define the ways in which women perform political roles. This research program is already under way, as exemplified by the important recent work of Joan Acker (1992), Debra Dodson (2006), Georgia Duerst-Lahti and Rita Mae Kelly (1995b), Mary Hawkesworth (2003), and Sally Kenney (1996), among others. Yet clearly we are at the frontier of this research program, and more work should follow the model these authors provide.

For example, both women and men enter the political arena infused with gender identities that shape their political socialization, expectations about political roles, and locations in politically relevant social and economic structures. The different propensity for men and women to work outside of the home, and the different occupational roles and status of men and women who do work, have important consequences for power within families and for the exercise of influence by men and women in the political sphere (see Burns, this volume). Attitudinal and partisan gender gaps have been explained in part by women's greater economic insecurity (a function of, among other things, a gendered division of labor in the workplace and home) and resultant sympathy for those who find themselves in need of a government safety net (see Huddy, Cassese, and Lizotte, this volume). Recent research highlights how unequal family responsibilities and persistent differences in political socialization continue to inhibit women from pursuing elective office (see Dolan, this volume). As Kirkpatrick observed some thirty years ago, "If definitions of femininity, self-conceptions, family and economic role distributions and politics are part of a single social fabric, then major changes in one entail parallel changes in others" (1974, 243).

Women thus enter politics from gendered contexts, and as Gretchen Ritter argues persuasively (this volume), the political system they enter is itself formed by deeply rooted ideas and practices pertaining to gender. For example, many public policies are premised in some way on assumptions about appropriate gender roles, whether it be masculinity with regard to the U.S. military (Katzenstein 1998), motherhood and social welfare policy (Skocpol 1992), or family roles within tax policy (Strach 2007). Women's exclusion from theoretically sex-neutral policies such as the G.I. Bill can have repercussions beyond the denial of specific benefits as these policies encourage

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and facilitate civic engagement among (mostly male) beneficiaries but not among those excluded from the policy because of their sex (see Mettler 2005).[9] Female legislators seeking to address the needs of women have to do so within an existing policy context shaped by previous assumptions about gender roles and capacities. The liberal democratic ideals on which our political system is premised are infused with expectations about political identity that are inherently masculine. We cannot assume political women experience a level or gender-neutral playing field but must attend to the ways in which political institutions themselves shape and constrain behavior in gendered ways (see, e.g., Acker 1992; Hale and Kelly 1989; Hawkesworth 2003; Stivers 1992). Indeed, we choose to start the collection with Ritter's chapter, which unlike the others, is centrally about gender in the U.S. political system rather than about women per se, in order to provide an appropriate framework for the chapters on women in American politics that follow.

A careful review of the literature on women and politics also reveals that how sex and gender matter has changed over the past thirty years. The experience of female candidates exemplifies this (see Dolan, this volume). Early scholarship emphasized the reluctance of voters to support female candidates, the tendency of parties to nominate women only as "sacrificial lambs," and the bias of interest groups against providing financial support to female candidates who they assumed were unlikely to win. Since the early 1990s, however, the story has been quite different, as summed up by the National Women's Political Caucus' oft-cited 1994 report that concluded "when women run, women win" (Newman 1994). Voters no longer discriminate against women and, in some cases, may prefer them. Parties not only nominate but provide resources and training to female candidates. Interest groups fund women at the same rate as they fund men. Yet the proportion of women serving in elected office remains rather stagnant and far below 50 percent. The changing reality has encouraged political scientists to refocus their attention to issues of candidate mobilization, media effects, and other ways in which gender continues to shape the electoral process. Moreover, the path of change has not always been unidirectional; students of women in the legislature note the important consequences of the Republican House takeover in 1994, most notably the dismantling of the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues (see Reingold's chapter, this volume). As this example suggests, sex and gender continue to be viewed as a threat to other bases of political solidarity (see Sanbonmatsu, this volume, for a detailed discussion), and women's influence in the political sphere remains fragile and contingent.

As the experiences of women in politics have evolved, so has our scholarship. Many critics have commented on the degree to which political science has maintained dominant approaches, concepts, and methodologies, and simply added sex as a variable or women as a subject (e.g., Bourque and Grossholtz 1974; Ritter and Mellow 2000; Sapiro 1991a). Recent scholarship is more likely to take a more nuanced approach, although all of the

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authors in this collection call for more research in this vein. At the same time, as Nancy Burns points out in her chapter, we should not dismiss all early scholarship, some of which examined gender with a serious and nuanced eye. In particular, Burns points to some of the classic work on American voting that did not, as is common, assume male behavior is the norm against which female behavior should be judged. This observation highlights what Suzanne Dovi (this volume) calls the "standards problem" – "the difficulty of identifying a proper benchmark for assessing women's political performance in democracies." In a classic example, women have long been described as inadequate and disengaged because their reported political efficacy lags behind that of men. Susan Bourque and Jean Grossholtz (1974) reinterpret these data: given the considerable constraints on the impact of any one citizen on the complex American political process, women may have a more "perceptive assessment" of their place in the political system, whereas men may be expressing "irrationally high rates of efficacy" (231). As this example underscores, scholars of women and politics continue to challenge our assumptions about what we expect from political actors and how we define political engagement.

Nancy Burns also points out the ways in which earlier scholarship used analysis of gender differences to question our theories of politics and political behavior more generally. This, too, has been an important contribution of the literature on women and politics. For example, Kira Sanbonmatsu (this volume) notes that examining descriptive representation challenges liberal theories of republican government by highlighting the degree to which group identity is politically relevant and contesting the assumption that any legislator, regardless of personal characteristics or experiences, can fully represent the interests of every constituent, provided she or he is tied to the electorate through election. In other words, what does the overwhelming evidence that female legislators are more supportive of and active for women's interests (see both Dovi and Reingold, this volume) mean for our understanding of the nature of representation in general? Similar questions arise in other subfields. What do the experiences of female candidates (see Dolan, this volume) tell us about our (gendered) expectations for political leadership? What do women's movements (Banaszak, this volume) teach us about the capacity for effective political influence from the "outside"? What do the specific experiences of women of color (see Junn and Brown, this volume) help us understand about how race and sex/gender shape political engagement in the United States?

As the last example suggests, the study of women and politics has also benefited from, and contributed to, our understanding of other politically less powerful groups. Women face many of the same but also many different constraints as other traditionally underrepresented groups. The most common comparison, of course, is to African Americans, and indeed, the movements for greater racial and gender equality have been interlinked throughout U.S.

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history. Scholarship has similarly adopted many concepts and hypotheses from the study of racial minorities in American politics. As useful as those comparisons and adoptions have been, a focus on women also highlights the important ways in which sex and gender are indeed different from other politically relevant divisions. For women, for example, the search for a shared, segregated space in which consciousness and resources can be created has been a crucial challenge for feminist mobilization, whereas segregation was a central problem, and yet also a source of strength and solidarity, for civil rights activists (see Burns, this volume, for a discussion).

At the same time, students of women and politics must avoid the all-too-common assumption that the experiences of one group of women are indicative of the experiences of all women. In particular, we should not conflate "women" with "African American women," "Latinas," and so on. To their credit, many scholars have been sensitive to the intersectionality of race and sex, but as many of the contributors to this volume suggest (see especially the Junn and Brown chapter), much more needs to be done. The growing numbers of African American, Latina, and other minority women in positions of political leadership offer exciting opportunities to expand and deepen our understanding of how race and sex/gender operate in American politics. Similarly, the study of women and politics often has focused on liberal women (feminist activists) and liberal definitions of women's issues (e.g., abortion rights). As Lee Ann Banaszak (this volume) points out, conservative women organize and participate in highly gendered ways and raise issues that are clearly gendered. We need to do more to ensure that our understanding of political women is attentive to the experiences and contributions of all women, regardless of race, ideology, or other characteristics. Moreover, we must avoid the assumption that the experiences of women in the United States are indicative of the experiences of women outside this country, or that women in the United States enjoy a higher level of political equality than women elsewhere. Considering American political women in a comparative context also draws our attention to various types of explanations. As Lisa Baldez (this volume) points out, for example, attention to the cross-national impact of electoral institutions (e.g., majority rule versus proportional representation, presence of gender quotas) shifts our attention away from the dominant candidate-centered explanations for women's underrepresentation in U.S. legislatures that emphasize the failure of individual women to put themselves forward and toward the structural impediments to women's election.

What did we see at the revolution? As the authors in this volume explain, the increasing presence of political women clearly has transformed political life in the United States, but the experiences of women in politics continue to be deeply shaped by gender. Kirkpatrick (1975, 242) ends *Political Woman* by asking, "Must it ever be thus? Is male dominance of power processes written in the stars and underwritten by human biology?" Although Kirkpatrick was hopeful that greater equity is possible, the work reviewed in this volume

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highlights how complex the opportunities and constraints faced by political women truly are.

Notes

1. Two women had served in cabinet-level positions before 1974: Oveta Culp Hobby held the post of secretary of health, education, and welfare (1953–5) under Eisenhower, and Frances Perkins, the first female cabinet member, served as secretary of labor (1933–45) under Franklin Roosevelt (CAWP 2007b).
2. The percentage of full-time political scientists who are women increased from just 10 percent in 1974 to 22 percent by 2000 (Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession 2001; Sarkees and McGlen 1999; Tolleson-Rinehart and Carroll 2006).
3. The first article about women or gender to appear in the *APSR* was also authored (or, more accurately, edited, because it contains items written by other, mostly male, authors as well) by a woman, Margaret A. Schaffner ("Notes on Current Legislation" 3, no. 3 [1909]:383–428) and includes a short discussion of the creation of a women's and children's department as part of the Minnesota Bureau of Labor. Other articles during that first decade (*APSR* began publication in 1906) examined legislation on the employment of women in Massachusetts, mother's pensions, and women's suffrage in England (see Kelly and Fisher 1993).
4. The *APSR* figures through 1991 are from Kelly and Fisher (1993). The *APSR* figures for 1992 through 2007 are data I have collected, based almost entirely on a review of article titles. This is a slightly different methodology from that employed by Kelly and Fisher, although I have no reason to expect the results would differ substantially. Data available on request.
5. As with journal articles, there are a number of important books about women and politics from the middle of the century (e.g., Duverger 1955). As Nancy Burns details in Chapter 4 of this collection, a number of the early, classic works of political science provided a sophisticated treatment of sex and gender, although most took up the topic in a less insightful way or ignored it altogether (Bourque and Grossholtz 1974).
6. We note that, even given the restricted coverage of this volume, our combined references contain more than 800 unique citations.
7. Some scholars disagree with the notion that biological sex difference and the social meaning of gender are independent of, or distinct from, each other. More generally, a full explication of the concepts of sex and gender (or the literatures addressing them) requires far more attention than is possible here. Useful starting places with regard to political science include Acker (1992), Beckwith (2005, 2007), Burns (2005), Duerst-Lahti and Kelly (1995b), Epstein (1988), and Hawkesworth (2005), to name just a few.
8. In the chapters of this volume, our authors recognize and highlight the distinction between sex and gender in different ways. Many make a point to use the word "sex" when discussing simple dichotomous differences between men and women and employ the term "gender" when considering socially constructed roles, expectations, processes, and institutions. Others prefer the term "gender" to encompass the discussion of men and women as social, rather than merely

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