

# **Roundtable: 'Feminism and Institutionalism: promising synthesis or another case of "master's tools"?'**

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**Convened and Chaired by  
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## **Introduction**

In this recent roundtable, members of the international research network FIIN ([www.femfiin.com](http://www.femfiin.com)) explored the intersection between feminism and institutionalism, reflecting on the potential for, and limits of institutionalist frameworks for the study of gender and politics. It was structured around three key questions/themes: What do (neo) institutionalist approaches contribute to feminist scholarship on political institutions, broadly defined? What does gendered and institutionally-focussed feminist work contribute to mainstream institutionalist understandings of structure and agency in political life? Is there a feminist institutionalism and, if so, of what does it comprise and how might it be operationalised? Panelists considered the epistemological and strategic costs and benefits of “borrowing” or “synthesizing” concepts and frameworks: what are the prospects for a genuine two-way engagement and synthesis – or will efforts flounder in another case of “master’s tools” and mainstream indifference?

Feminist and mainstream political science have taken an institutional ‘turn’, creating the opportunity for potential interchange between ‘neo institutionalist’ scholarship and feminist research on gender and institutions (Lovenduski 1998, Gatens 1998, Randall 2002, Mackay 2004, Kenny 2007). Neo institutionalism (NI) and institutionally-focussed feminist political science (FPS) are broad schools in themselves, however there are a number of common preoccupations (within and across the divides): the interaction between social actors and institutions, broadly defined; the interplay between formal rules

and informal practices, norms and ‘ways of doing things’; and the consequent effects of these dynamics. Each approach takes a ‘value-critical’ stance, sharing an understanding that seemingly neutral institutional processes and practices are in fact embedded in norms and values, and power asymmetries. Both NI and FPS are centrally concerned with explanations of institutional creation, continuity and change.

In efforts to date, explicitly to synthesize feminist gender analysis with neo institutional theory, it is argued that there is scope for mutual benefit. NI is seen to offer a range of mid-level conceptual tools and ideas to feminist research (Beyeler 2008, Driscoll and Krook 2009, forthcoming, Kenny 2007, Krook 2003, Kulawick 2008, Friedenvall 2008, Lovenduski 1998, Mackay and Meier, 2003, Waylen 2008). Conversely, critical insights from feminist approaches could enrich new institutional analysis, most pertinently through establishing gender as a crucial dimension of political institutions (see Chappell 2008, Kenny, 2007,2008; Kenny and Paantjens 2006; Kulawik 2008; Mackay 2006; Mackay and Meier 2003).

### **Panelists**

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### **About the panelists:**

All panelists are members of a collaborative theory-building international network called FIIN ([www.femfiin.com](http://www.femfiin.com)), formed to examine the prospects for developing a systematic

feminist institutionalist approach. Several also took part in a recent workshop, part of the 2008 ECPR Joint Sessions in Rennes, on this theme. A special 'Critical Perspectives on Feminist Institutionalism' is forthcoming in the APSA journal *Politics & Gender*.

Panelists bring to the debate different perspectives on both institutionalism and gender analysis as well as differing degrees of skepticism about prospects for and benefits of the intellectual endeavour. Their work covers a wide range of relevant empirical themes, including political recruitment and representation, gender quotas, gendered bureaucracies, transitions to democracies, and institutional innovation at sub-state, national and international levels.

**Chappell's** work on gender and institutions has operationalized and gendered conceptual tools drawn upon sociological and historical institutionalism to analyse the different gendered effects of state bureaucracies in comparative focus (2002, 2006). Current research examines gender mainstreaming in international institutions, particularly the International Criminal Court (Chappell 2008b) .

**Friedenvall** critically employs aspects of historical and discursive institutionalism in order to analyse the trajectories of women's political representation in Sweden over time, including candidate gender quotas (Freidenvall 2005, 2008, Freidenvall et al, 2006).

**Kenny** is one of the first scholars to set out an agenda for developing a gendered and feminist institutionalism (Kenny 2007, Kenny and Mackay 2009 forthcoming). She uses feminist and new institutional theory to explore the gendered dynamics of political recruitment in post devolution Scottish politics (Kenny 2008).

**Lovenduski** was one of the first feminist scholars to flag up the potential of mutual interplay between neo institutionalist and feminist/gendered approaches to politics (Lovenduski 1998). Her multi-dimensional model, created with Pippa Norris (1995) represents an early attempt to create a gendered institutionalist framework for analyzing political recruitment. Her current research on gender and the state, includes political representation, European Equality Agencies and public policy debates (Lovenduski

2005a, 2005b).

**Waylen's** current research interests focus broadly on democratisation, global political economy and governance (Waylen 2000, 2007, Rai and Waylen 2008) . She seeks to operationalise a systematic feminist historical institutionalist approach at a macro level through comparative cross-national research on gender and democratic transitions (Waylen 2007, 2008, 2009 forthcoming)

### **Chair/Discussant**

**Mackay** is co-founder of the Feminism and Institutionalism International Network, animated by a critical interest in the potential interplay between the two approaches (Mackay and Meier 2003; Mackay 2004, Kenny and Mackay 2009 forthcoming). Current work uses feminist and new institutional theory to explore the gendered constraints on institutional and policy innovation in post devolution Scotland (Mackay 2006, 2009).

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