Feminist Discursive Institutionalism: Gender and Political Representation in Sweden

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Abstract

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Discursive institutionalism is the fourth and most recent of the ‘new institutionalisms’. This approach has grown out of the problems of the three older new institutionalisms in explaining change, given their seemingly static view of institutions. This paper focuses on discourse as one particular type of informal institution and discusses how discourses can change the gendered characteristics of institutions and how they can alter the politics that they produce. Drawing on the insights of discourse analysis and discursive institutionalism, debates over women’s political representation and gender quotas in Sweden are analyzed.
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One of the most reliable predictions of institutional theory is that institutions are difficult to change. Institutions are constrained by existing institutional forms and practices and tend to be protected by those that have something to gain and that prosper from them. Theorists working from an institutional perspective have, therefore, come up with many consistent theories on institutional stability and persistence but have been less successful in explaining institutional change. However, understanding the mechanisms behind institutional change and the implications of such change is one of the central themes of feminist political research. At the same time as feminist research is interested in explaining how institutions reflect and reinforce gendered patterns of power, it also rests on a revisionary and transformative agenda. In order for feminist research to benefit from institutional theory, there is an obvious need for better tools to understand institutional change.

In 1984 March and Olsen identified ‘new institutionalism’ in the singular. In 1996 Hall and Taylor recognized three ‘new institutionalisms’: rational choice, historical and sociological institutionalism. Today, a forth institutionalism has entered the theoretical scene: discursive institutionalism, or what has been described as an ideational or constructivist institutionalism (Hay 2006, Schmidt 2006). This discursive approach focuses on discourses as one particular type of informal institution that influences how individuals understand and may seek to change the status quo (Freidenvall & Krook 2007). It has been developed out of an involvement with the limitations of the three older ‘new institutionalisms’ and, as a consequence, as a new ‘new institutionalism’ it is very much in an initial phase.

In this paper, I focus on discourse as one particular type of informal institution and discuss how discourses can change the gendered characteristics of institutions and how they can alter the politics that they produce. Drawing on insights from discourse analysis and discursive institutionalism, I analyze debates over women’s political representation and gender quotas in Sweden to show how ways of framing and speaking about an issue affects the prospects for – and eventual shape of – policy change.

The paper proceeds in four sections. In the first section, the institutionalist approach will be described. The four institutional approaches as well as the core guiding concepts – such as critical junctures, path dependence, layering and conversion - will be defined. In the second section, discursive institutionalism will be scrutinized. This section will focus on what discursive institutionalism is, what topics it has been applied to and the critique that has been directed against it. In the third, the debates over women’s political representation and gender quotas in Sweden will be analyzed from a discursive institutionalist perspective to show how the framing and speaking of an issue have implications for policy outcome. In the forth and concluding section, I raise some concerns with regard to the limitations of discursive institutionalism.

I. Institutions and Institutional Change

Research on institutions has been conducted primarily on the basis of four broad approaches: rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism, sociological institutionalism. Until recently, most scholars recognized three broad schools of institutionalist thinking: rational choice, historical and sociological institutionalism (Hall and Taylor 1996; Immergut 1998). However, some recognize as many as seven distinct approaches, adding normative, empirical, interest representation and international institutionalism (Peters 1999).
institutionalism and, most recently, discursive institutionalism. Although these approaches differ in terms of which specific institutions they focus on, they share a common analytical concern for formal and informal institutions. While earlier research on institutions in political science focused primarily on institutions as the formal features of political systems, such as electoral systems, political parties and executive and judicial bodies, the focus on institutions in more recent research has been extended to include the procedures, routines, conventions, norms and cognitive scripts that also structure political life, often as if they were formal rules.

Rational choice institutionalists operate primarily at the micro-level, with the aim of understanding the origins of institutions, the mechanisms of their continued existence and their effects on macro-level political outcomes (Weingast 2002). Departing from game theory, they perceive institutions as conventions created by actors in order to overcome collective action problems (Ostrom 1990). Actors are, thus, posited as having fixed preferences and as calculating strategically in order to maximize their preferences. In line with this view, some argue that institutions survive when they are more advantageous to actors than other institutional forms. However, others argue that these dynamics do not necessarily result in the most efficient outcomes (North 1990) and that institutions are not only structures of coordination but also structures of power and domination (Knight 1992; Moe 2006).

Historical institutionalists conduct their research mainly at the macro-level, focusing on how institutions structure action and outcomes. They focus on sequences in development, timing of events and phases of political change as well as the long-term consequences of largely contingent events (Hall and Thelen 1996; Pierson and Skocpol 2002). They approach institutions as the various formal and informal procedures, regularized practices, routines, norms and conventions that are embedded in the organization of politics, society and the economy. While interested in asymmetries of power and how these asymmetries are intensified (Thelen and Steinmo 1992), most scholars within this tradition emphasise the path dependence and unintended consequences that result from such historical development (Hall and Taylor 1996; Steinmo et al. 1992; Thelen 1999; Mahoney 2000). While some scholars deal with questions of sequencing and possible period effects (Lieberman 2001), others try to elaborate on the division between institutional creation and institutional consequences. Seeking to explain institutional development over time and mechanisms of change (Pierson 2004), concepts like institutional conversion (the conversion of institutions through the adoption of new goals or the incorporation of new groups) and layering (the layering of new elements onto otherwise stable institutional frameworks) have been introduced to deal with the complex relationships between continuity and change (Thelen 2003).

Sociological institutionalists focus on the links between micro- and macro-level political interactions (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Departing from ‘cultural knowledge’ and a more interpretive perspective, they define institutions so as to include formal rules, procedures and norms as well as symbol systems, cognitive frames and cultural scripts and schemata that provide the ‘frames of meaning’ guiding human behaviour (March and Olsen 1989). Sociological institutionalists argue that action and agency are intertwined with interpretation and that individual actors must always try to recognize and respond to particular situations based on available ‘scripts’ (Hall and Taylor 1996, pp. 948-9). To a greater extent than in the other two schools, they stress the interactive and mutually constitutive character of the relationship between institutions and individual actions. In direct contradiction to the rational institutionalist view of human behaviour as following a
logic of interest’, which is prior to institutions (including culture, norms and identity),
sociological institutionalist assume that institutions constitute interests. Basic preferences and
identity are, thus, embedded in institutions, and rationality is socially constructed and
historically contingent according to a ‘logic of appropriateness’ (DiMaggio and Powell 1991;
March and Olsen 1989).

Discursive institutionalists, finally, connect their analyses to the micro-level and the
macro-level. They differ from the other three ‘new institutionalisms’ in terms of object of
explanation, logic of explanation and kind of explanation (Schmidt 2006). First of all, they
focus on the substantive content of ideas and the role of discourses in influencing actor
interests, preferences and behaviors (Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Hay 2006). Secondly,
they view discourse itself as a means of power, able to cement the status quo through
socialization but also capable of change through interactive processes of communication
(Fischer 2003; Schmidt 2002). Following from this, thirdly, it highlights the importance of
discourse in generating and legitimizing ideas about political action, thereby outlining a
theory of institutional change (Schmidt 2006). However, despite their attempts to bring ideas
into institutional analysis, most scholars in this vein are careful to distinguish ‘discourses’
from ‘institutions.’ Rather, they refer to the institutional contexts that affect discourses
(Schmidt 2002) or to the discursive effects of institutions (Fischer 2003). Thus, while they
stress the importance of discourse in institutional innovation, dynamism and transformation
(Hay 2006), they stop short of treating discourses on a par with institutions themselves.

Formal and Informal Institutions, Institutional Stability and Change

A common feature of all of these four approaches is their focus on formal and
informal institutions and their effort to afford both kinds of institutions equal status. While
formal institutions are normally defined as the rules of the game that guide human
behaviour, informal institutions emerge when formal institutions are incomplete; when
actors prefer, but cannot achieve, a formal institutional solution; or when actors pursue goals
that are not publicly acceptable. Another common feature is their focus on institutional
stability. Most of this research aims at explaining path dependent lock-in effects of the
expectations and behaviour of individuals into relatively predictable, self-reinforcing
patterns, even in the face of major changes in background conditions. The concern of
historical institutionalists with process tracing, for instance, has been focused primarily on
institutional genesis at the expense of an account of post-formative institutional change (Hay
2006).

Institutional change does occur, and most scholars draw a sharp analytical demarcation
line between moments of change and mechanisms of reproduction. New institutions rarely
emerge, and when they do, they do so as the product of exogenous shocks, such as wars,
revolutions and other crises. These ‘critical junctures,’ which cannot be predicted from prior
events or initial conditions and which are characterized by uncertainty, since various
alternative institutional arrangements are possible, serve as essential turning points between
two structures of incentives (or two ‘logics’) in which the – often contingent – decisions of
actors establish certain directions of change (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Mahoney 2000;
Sundström 2003). ‘Path dependence’ then prevents the emergence of alternative options
through the mechanisms of increasing returns (North 1990; Pierson 2000). These
mechanisms reinforce movement along a given path and support continuities, even when
other choices come out superior or more efficient (Aminzade 1992; Tilly 2001). This
approach, thus, resembles a ‘punctuated equilibrium’ model or “configurative moments” in
which change only occurs in bursts: where long periods of stasis alternate with short and dramatic turns of event (cf. Krasner 1984; Collier and Collier 1991).

In recent years, this perspective has been challenged by scholars that criticize this strict separation between institutional creation and institutional reproduction and the inability to account for incremental change. For instance, historical institutionalists argue that institutions more typically survive through dynamics of institutional conversion, where existing institutions are directed toward new purposes, and institutional layering, where some elements of existing institutions are renegotiated but other elements remain (Thelen 2003). Discursive institutionalists emphasize how elements of one discourse are translated into another through “discursive alliances or bricolage” (Campbell and Pedersen 2001, 12). This perspective is, thus, closer to a ‘bounded innovation’ model in which periods of institutional reproduction overlap with moments of institutional creation in partial and often unanticipated ways (cf. Weir 1992).

II. Discourses as Institutions

The three older ‘new institutionalisms’ have been criticized for being overly deterministic and for being static, having difficulty explaining institutional change (Schmidt 2005; Hay 2006). Rational choice institutionalism, on the one hand, has been criticized for its views on fixed preferences, its focus on equilibrium conditions and its unquestioning view on institutional rules as good or efficient and actors as instrumental. Sociological institutional institutionalism, on the other hand, stresses the role of collective processes of interpretation in the establishment and reproduction of institutions and can, therefore, better tackle the issue of inefficiencies in institutions. However, it has been criticized for being too general and too culturally deterministic and specific and, therefore, not being able to draw general conclusions. Historical institutionalism, finally, has been criticized for its difficulties in explaining human agency.

In recent years, discursive institutionalism has, thus, emerged as a new approach to address some of the problems of the ‘older’ new institutionalisms. As Vivien Schmidt states, this approach grew out of scholars’ concern with the “inability of any of the three older new institutionalisms to explain change, given their often very static view of institutions” (Schmidt 2005). The events around the collapse of the Communist states in particular exposed the shortcomings of the new institutionalisms and their static presuppositions.

Scholars working within this new approach recognize the importance of ideas and discourse in explaining change within the state. But while some of them have incorporated these new thoughts into their new institutionalist approaches, others have taken the step into discursive institutionalism and its emphasis on ideas and how they are imparted via discourses. The major difference between the two groups revolves around the relationship between ideas and institutions: while the new institutionalists recognize the role of ideas in shaping institutions, discursive institutionalists try to avoid some of the deterministic presuppositions of the ‘older’ new institutionalisms and stress the transformative capacity of ideas in shaping institutions. Within the rational choice institutionalism tradition, for instance, it has been argued that ideas operate like road maps, guiding interests in specific policy directions (Goldstein 1993; Weingast 1995). However, scholars working within this tradition have been criticized for the unclear distinction between ideas and interests. Taking ideas seriously would mean that rational choice institutionalist scholars would need to question their assumptions on fixed preferences and neutral institutions (Schmidt 2006). Within the historical institutionalism tradition, moreover, ideas are seen as central to change and constitutive of new institutions. However, for most scholars working in this field,
structures are viewed as coming prior to ideas and influencing their acceptability. Those historical institutionalist scholars that focus on ideas as explanatory of change or those that use ideas to explain the different dynamics of change in politics and practices have moved into the discursive institutionalist field. Within the sociological institutional tradition ideas have always had a central position. However, there is a split between scholars that view ideas as static ideational structures and those that view ideas as more dynamic, where frames and narratives not only establish how actors conceptualize the world but promote change by enabling actors to challenge the frames. As Schmidt points out, the three new institutionalisms focus on different aspects of ideas and, therefore, tend to be positioned differently on a positivist-constructivist spectrum (Schmidt 2006).

In contrast to most scholars working within the new institutionalism traditions, discursive institutionalism scholars take a more constructivist view on ideas and identity. As Schmidt and Radaelli note, discourse “[h]elps to create an opening to policy change by altering actors’ perceptions of the policy problem /…/ influencing their preferences, and, thereby, enhancing their political institutional capacity to change” (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004:188). According to Kenneth Lynggaard (2007), discourses unfold as ideas are articulated and, then, turn into systems of concepts and conceptions. Discourses can, thus, be defined as “a system of meaning that orders the production of conceptions and interpretations of the social world in a particular context” (Kjaer and Pedersen 2001:220). Institutions can then be defined as, “authorized and sanctioned discourse” (ibid.). Following Lynggaard (2007), change may, thus, be broken down into two processes: 1) the process of ideas being turned into discourse (articulation); and 2) the process of discourse being turned into institutions (institutionalization).

Discourse analysis and discursive change

When it comes to change, scholars within discursive analysis traditions often trace discursive changes over longer periods of time. By analyzing shifts in policy formulation, its underlying presuppositions and premises as well as the relationship between policy representation and problem solution, change may be studied. According to Carol Lee Bacchi (1999), change can be analyzed by studying discursive shifts over time, for instance by analyzing how perceptions of women’s political representation may change over time, by asking questions such as what is the problem of women’s under-representation in politics represented to be, what are the diagnosed causes of the under-representation, what underlying presuppositions or assumptions is this representation based on and what solutions are identified as legitimate. Furthermore, by asking questions such as how subjects are constituted within these representations – the way in which groups are assigned positions and value within discourse - one may analyze what can be said and done and by whom, etc. Thus, the ways in which problems of women’s under-representation in politics are conceived and concepts and premises on which they are based limit the range of possible solutions. This serves the purposes of those that want to protect their positions and power in society by not promoting change or by moderating change (Edelman 1998).

In order to understand the dynamics of change, discourse analysts Laclau and Mouffe have introduced the term chains of equivalence. These chains refer to how meaning is established in a discourse. In discourses there are nodal points, or signs, around which other points are gathered and comprehended. The nodal points can be understood in relation to what it is described as being the opposite, the constituted outside. One example of how these chains of equivalence and nodal points function can be taken from Jorgensen Winther and Phillips’ description of the discursive construction of ‘man’:
The discursive construction of ‘man’ defines how a ‘man’ is described and how he differs from others. A generally prevalent discourse puts an equals sign between ‘man’ and ‘strength’ and ‘football’ (and a lot more) and contradicts it with ‘woman’ and ‘passive’ and ‘knitting’ (Winther Jorgensen & Phillips 1999/2000:50).

Concretely, this means that an analysis inspired by Laclau & Mouffe’s concepts of logics of equivalence begins by identifying a ‘nodal point’. Then the chains of equivalence are identified by examining the concepts that give meaning to the nodal point. In the example above, ‘man’ represents the nodal point. The signs ‘strength’ and ‘football’ function as links in the chain of equivalence. The nodal point ‘man’ is given its meaning in relation to what it is not – ‘woman’, ‘passive’ and ‘knitting’ – which refer to the constituted outside. Thus, the prevalence of change may be studied by analyzing ideational shifts in the logics of equivalence, as well as studies on discursive tensions.

Discursive institutionalists would in a similar vein argue that the dynamics in institutional change may be captured by several concepts, such conflicts over meaning, translation and policy entrepreneurs (Lynggaard 2007). For instance, policy change depends on conflicts over meaning or the prevalence of alternative discourses that contest specific institutional contexts (Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Hajer 1995; Lynggaard 2007). Kenneth Lynggaard argues, furthermore, that although a certain solution may have reached an institutionalized position, conflicts may continue to grow around the particular nature of the problem that the prescribed solution is to solve (Lynggaard 2007:295-96). These conflicts, he argues, may in turn result in readjustments of the solutions and, consequently, pave the way for institutional change. Institutional change may also be promoted by translation. According to Kjaer and Pedersen (2001:219), translation may be defined as “the process whereby concepts and conceptions from different social contexts come into contact with each other and trigger a shift in the existing order of interpretation and action in a particular context”.

And finally, the dynamics of institutional change may be captured through the concept of policy entrepreneurs, or the role played by actors in the articulation of problems.

Discursive institutionalism in empirical work

Discursive institutionalism can primarily be associated with Vivien Schmidt, who has applied it empirically in comparative economy (See Schmidt 2002, 2005, 2006). Her analytical focus is directed at how political actors have used discourse to implement important, though unpopular, reforms within the economic or welfare sector. According to Schmidt, ideas are the substantive content of discourse. They operate at three levels: policies, programs and philosophies, and can be categorized into two types: cognitive and normative. Discourse is associated with the interactive process of conveying ideas, and it can be categorized into two types: coordinative discourse and communicative discourse, which must be applied in order for reforms to be successful. While both of them can be seen as “a set of ideas bringing new rules, values and practices but also as a resource used by entrepreneurial actors to produce and legitimate those ideas”, the former focuses on the discourse among policy actors and the latter on the discourse between political actors and the public (See Schmidt 2002, Chapter 5).

Schmidt argues, more concretely, that the coordinative discourse must be applied to convince the political elites of the potential of the proposed reform, while the communicative discourse must be applied to justify the reform to the public. This perspective differs from the three ‘older’ new institutionalisms, since it is centred on “who talks to whom about what when, how and why, in order to show how ideas are generated, debated, adopted, and changed as policy makers, political leaders, and the public are
persuaded, or not, of the cognitive necessity and normative appropriateness of ideas” (Schmidt 2006:11). Institutional context, such as material interests, matter, but they are viewed as constituted by ideas and discourse. Ideas in discourse, likewise, are seen not only as reflecting cultural norms but also as constitutive of the discursive frames that the ideas are embedded within.

The focus in any discursive institutionalist work is, thus, on the dynamic interplay between formal institutions, on the one hand, and ideas and discourse as informal institutions, on the other, and its implications for policy-making. Since actors are embedded in institutional arrangements, such as laws, regulations, cultural conventions and discursive frames, these arrangements will affect ways of comprehending ‘reality’ and consequently the outcomes of their choices. In the following section, the debate over women’s political representation and gender quotas in Sweden will be discussed in light of the discursive institutionalist and the discourse analysis approaches.

III. Gender and political representation in Sweden

Sweden and the Nordic countries have been highlighted in recent years as an exception to the rule that political decision-making is a man’s game. Whereas the average proportion of female parliamentarians around the world was 17.8 percent in 2008, the corresponding figure for the Nordic countries was 41.4 percent. Today, the Swedish parliament consists of 47 percent women, making it number two on the world ranking of women in national parliaments (www.ipu.org).

Figure 1. The political representation of women in the Swedish parliament 1921-2006

In an historical perspective, the take-off phase for women’s political representation in Sweden occurred in the 1970s. In 1965 the share of female parliamentarians was 12 percent (the international average at this time was 8 percent). In 1976, it had increased to 24 percent (international average 11 percent). Since then, the number of women parliamentarians has gradually increased by a few percentage units for each election, with the exception of the
general election in 1991 when it fell from 38 to 34 percent. To what extent can discursive institutionalism help us explaining institutional change in Sweden in terms of women’s political representation?

Literature on variation in women’s political representation often emphasizes the importance of the electoral system, where the proportional system is singled out as one of the most important factors explaining a high representation of women. As Pippa Norris has pointed out, women are twice as likely to be elected in parliaments that apply a proportional electoral system as compared to majoritarian electoral systems (Norris 2006). Intervening conditions, such as average district magnitude, levels of proportionality, closed lists, the use of quotas and party ideology (where left parties tend to be more sympathetic to gender equality) are also often pointed to (Caul 1999; Norris 2006). However, as political scientist Diane Sainsbury has noted, the formal institutional character of the Swedish political system, such as the electoral system and the party system, has not changed in any dramatic way since the 1970s (Sainsbury 2005). The principle of proportional representation, for instance, was introduced as early as 1911 and has remained more or less intact since then. The party system, moreover, has been a relatively stable five party system, including parties to the right and centre as well as the left. The five party system developed into a seven party system in 1988 and 1991, when the Green Party and the Christian Democratic Party (a left and a right party, respectively) entered the parliamentary arena, i.e. after the take-off phase. Quotas, which have been introduced by many countries in recent years to remedy women’s under-representation in politics (Dahlerup ed. 2006; Krook 2005), cannot be singled out as an explanatory factor, since no legal quotas have been adopted in Sweden (Dahlerup & Freidenvall 2005; Freidenvall et al 2006). Rather, quotas have only been adopted by some of the political parties, and this in the late 1980s and 1990s, i.e. after the take-off phase (Freidenvall 2006; Dahlerup & Freidenvall 2008). The take-off phase did coincide with the 1969-1974 constitutional reform, when a unicameral system was introduced in Sweden. This reform, however, did not change the number of parliamentary seats. Thus, generally speaking, factors such as the electoral system, the party system and additional institutional factors should be seen as important starting points for explaining the large number of women in Swedish politics.

Discursive change in Sweden

The course of events that took place in Sweden at the end of the 1960s and in the beginning of the 1970s represents an essential shift between two discursive policy formulations regarding women’s political representation. This first quotation is a statement by Prime Minister Tage Erlander (Social Democratic Party) in a party debate in 1944, and the second one by the same Prime Minister, but 24 years later.

It is a great sacrifice we demand of women – that they in addition to the care of the household should deal with questions of public concern, to such a large extent that is required in order for the women’s representation in parliament to increase (Hertha 1944).

Women’s under-representation in politics is primarily due to traditional sex roles in society. They hinder women from participating in politics on equal terms as men. Therefore, our work must concentrate partly on changing the sex role pattern, partly on creating opinion for a greater participation of women in political and other public work (Hertha 3/1968).
The two quotations above represent two different discursive framings – or logics – with regard to women’s political representation. The first statement represents the dominant view, dating back to the 1940s, of women as a-political subjects. The prevailing norm was that women and men had complementary roles, and to the extent that gender issues were put on the political agenda, they were expressed as women’s issues. According to the prevalent housewife’s contract in Sweden, to be a mother and the prime caretaker of children and of the household was the proper vocation for a woman (Hirdman 1994:22). In order to increase the number of women in politics, women would have to leave their homes – supposedly against their will. Women’s domestic role was naturalized, given the fixed view on gender according to which women and men were supposed to have natural, predetermined traits and functions, supporting arguments that women’s under-representation in politics was inevitable and/or even desirable. This hegemonic discourse thus referred to the meanings – discursive formations – that were dominant in the 1940s-1960s by hindering alternative meanings from becoming established and, consequently, from attaining a position as normal and right – a taken-for-granted meaning. As Laclau and Mouffe have pointed out, a predominant discursive formation hinders other alternative discourses from becoming established and takes the status quo as common sense. It is considered the only normal and correct meaning. In this process there is always a dominant group – in group – which has the preferential right of interpretation and can attach meaning to the issue at hand at the expense of the others (Laclau & Mouffe 2001).

The second statement represents the dominant view that emerged in the late 1960s. The new political discourse that was established expressed the notion that women and men should be treated equally. Women and men should have equal rights to participation in politics and other public bodies and an equal responsibility for the home and children. The best solution to this problem was to engage in attitudinal work to inform people. A few years later, Prime Minister Olof Palme seconded Tage Erlander’s new articulation of women’s political representation:

As the quotation illustrates, women’s issues were now linked to principles of equal rights for the sexes and were for the first time discussed by a party leader as being important questions for the party. As the quotation also shows, it was pointed out that the party had a responsibility to assist women in their struggle for political inclusion. With the help of long term educational measures and guidelines, women should be assimilated into political life and granted a democratic right to equal representation. By framing the issue as a public issue, instead of a women’s issue, there was also a shift of focus in terms of responsibility for change, from individual women to the political parties. There is, thus, also a shift of focus from women as the problem and the ones that need to be changed to the inadequacies of the political system and the political parties that have a responsibility to act.

As these quotations show, articulations are not stable. Also, far from all articulations are hegemonic. In order to be hegemonic, an articulation needs to stand out as the
predominant discursive formation that blocks out competing meanings as well as those identities that are connected with these meanings or the individuals that identify themselves with them. Thus, some concepts and categories take on a dominant position, while others are constructed as inferior (Laclau & Mouffe 2001). Any study based on a discursive institutionalist perspective, thus, needs to take into account these various competing meanings and attempts at blocking them out.

Subject positions

In the discursive framings of women’s political representation in Sweden in the 1970s, three major subject positions of women can be identified: the working woman, the equal woman and the loyal woman.

The working woman

Discussions of women’s political representation in Sweden were explicitly connected to women’s equal participation in the work force. The economic boom of the 1960s had resulted in a labor shortage and a great need for women workers (Lindvert 2002). This led to a series of ‘family-friendly’ reforms, such as free maternity care, a maternity allowance, child allowances and a law banning employers from dismissing women on the grounds of marriage or pregnancy. Later reforms, such as individual taxation for spouses, subsidized child care, parental insurance, etc., were introduced to facilitate women’s entry to the labor market.

In the debates over women’s political representation, it was stressed that while women should participate more extensively in public life by taking part in professional work and political decision-making, men should take greater responsibility for domestic work and the care of children. By participating in paid professional work, women should be emancipated from the economic dependency on men, and by participating in public decision-making, women should be a part of forming and shaping their own future. In the brochure The Family in the Future - A Socialist Family Policy published by the Federation of Social Democratic Women in 1972, it was stated:

If any change is to be brought about, it is necessary that all people participate in the various activities of society. Therefore, it is important that women also demand the right to employment and acceptable working conditions. Household work holds no ‘freedom’ for women – the housewife is no revolutionary (SSKF, Familjen i framtiden, en socialistisk familjepolitik, 1972).

Debates over more women in politics were, thus, centred on the ideal of the dual bread-winner model, according to which both women and men should contribute to the care and sustenance of the family (cp. Sainsbury 1996). Individual responsibility, self-sufficiency and economic independence were highlighted as key concepts. In order for gender equality to be achieved, the two sexes must cooperate, and the stereotyped gender roles that women and men were socialized into had to be addressed and changed.

These articulations gave rise to various subject positions for women. First, women were constituted as important cogs in the wheels of production. This can be seen a part of the modernistic view of taking advantage of all pools of competence in order to enrich society. Also, key features such as individual responsibility, economic independence and self-sufficiency opened up for subjectivities, such as single moms and single bread-winner models.
The equal woman

In a similar vein, the normative arguments for an increase in women’s representation were framed around ideals of equal rights and democracy. Women’s inclusion in politics was identified as a matter of equal rights to political office, and the under-representation of women in politics was seen as a deficiency in the functioning of democracy. Since women constituted half of the population, they were entitled to half of the power, it was argued. Without an equal balance, Sweden would be an unfinished democracy. In the Social Democratic Gender Equality Program of 1969, it was stated that “Equality requires a society… where individuals have greater opportunities to participate in the decision-making processes that influence his every day situation [Jämlikhet [Equality] 1969:13]. In a publication by the Federation of Social Democratic Women, it was stated that “If any change is to be brought about it is necessary that all people participate in the various activities of society” (Familjen i framtiden, en socialistisk familjepolitik [The family in the future: a socialist family policy] 1972).

The issue of women’s political representation was, thus, framed in both gendered and ungendered terms: it was gendered by promoting more women in politics as part of the principle of equal rights of participation and influence in the economy and society at large, and is was ungendered by emphasizing women’s participatory rights as an individual issue and an issue for voters and citizens, not a women specific issue (Sainsbury 2005). As the quotations above show, it was important that “individuals” and “all people” are granted the opportunity to take part in public decision-making. The more the issue was articulated as a regular issue concerning democracy and its citizens, the more political sympathy it won (Freidenvall 2006).

The discursive framing of women’s political representation as a citizen’s right had important advantages. As political scientist Diane Sainsbury has pointed out, party women, though divided along partisan lines, could unite in their criticism of being denied equal rights and together press demands for active measures to be taken to redress this problem (Sainsbury 2005). Secondly, by framing women’s under-representation as an issue of a malfunctioning democracy, their arguments for more women in politics were difficult to oppose. While all women’s sections within the political parties actively worked for an increased representation for women in politics, they were split on the issue of gender quotas (Freidenvall 2006). For instance, it was argued that gender quotas were contrary to the principle of equal opportunity for all and indeed were discriminatory by involving group preference at the expense of more well qualified candidates that were set aside. In order to tone down the potential gender conflict that quotas implied, many quota proponents related their argumentation to acceptable concepts. For instance, Maj-Britt Theorin, one of the leaders of the Federation of Social Democratic Women and a Member of Parliament, suggested that the word ‘quota’ should be avoided: “Do not use the word ‘quota.’ Talk about principles of distribution, if that suits you better” (The Social Democratic Party Congress 1972). At the 1978 Congress of the Federation of Social Democratic Women, it was proposed that the party adopt a quota provision, stipulating that neither women nor men could occupy more than 60 percent of the seats in any political body (The Federation of Social Democratic Women 1978). Fearing that this proposal for gender quotas was “a very militant demand”, however, the proposal was reformulated, and at the subsequent Party Congress in 1978 the Federation of Social Democratic Women proposed that “a goal in the long run would be that neither gender should possess more than 60 % of the seats (Social Democratic Party 1978:845, my italics). By using gender neutral terms, and by proposing goals rather than quotas, their demands were toned down. Over the next few years, the
Federation made new proposals, for instance that all vacant seats be shared between women and men. At the Social Democratic Party Congress in 1984, Maj Lis Lööw, a key representative of the National Federation of Social Democratic Women and a Member of Parliament, argued that “We [the National Federation of Social Democratic Women] do not require absolute justice /…/a reasonable distribution of seats does not require ‘50-50’ up to the very last woman or man. Rather, let us have the goal that neither sex should have less than 40 percent. Instead of 50-50 we will get 40-60” (National Federation of Social Democratic Women, Congress 1984, Minutes, p.548). Thus, women’s demands for special measures within this party were connected to ideologically key concepts such as redistribution and equality as equal opportunity. At the same time, the demands were linked to repertoires devoid of feminist claims.

The Loyal Woman

Debates over women’s political representation in Sweden have often revolved around the argument that women and men should cooperate, not compete. As unions and employers are involved in collective bargaining concerning wage settlements and labour market policies – as reflected in the Swedish corporatist and consociational approach to politics – women and men should cooperate in the pursuit of gender equality. Many proposals for more women in politics stressed the shared problems of women and men: men were also victims of gender inequality, and the problems should be dealt with together. Women and men were, thus, being seen as equally ‘disadvantaged’, and there was no real conflict between the sexes. Step by step and standing side-by-side, women and men should join hands in their struggle for allegedly common goals. In this conciliatory frame, the promotion of more women in politics was, thus, constructed as a win-win situation, with advantages for both women and men and a struggle free of conflict.

The reports of a national commission of inquiry on women’s representation in the state bureaucracy represent one example of this conciliatory frame – of gender equality as a common project. In the first report, written by two feminists, it was argued that “[w]e live in a male society where men’s experiences and values are the norm /…/today men dominate politics and thus have a great influence on women’s lives” (DsA 1986). It was also stated that in order for women to gain power, men had to give up power. Legislated quotas were suggested as a means to remedy women’s under-representation. However, in the final report, with the title Varannan Damernas [Every other one for the Ladies], the tone was softer (SOU 1987). Here it was argued that government bodies should reflect the population and that an increase in women’s representation was a question of increasing democracy and broadening the basis of decision-making. As a concession to political parties and trade unions, which were opponents of quotas, it was proposed that targets would be introduced, increasing the proportion of women in state agencies to 30 percent by 1992, to 40 percent by 1995 and to 50 percent by 1998. If these goals were not achieved, the question of quotas should be followed up. The proposal for a law on quotas was, consequently, replaced with the threat of a law on quotas.

This discourse of gender equality as a common project for women and men was also incorporated into the party quota system adopted by the Social Democratic Party in 1993. By creating two lists, one for women and one for men, and then zipping them together like a zipper by alternating the places on the party lists between women and men, competition and conflict between the sexes were eliminated. While women were supposed to compete with fellow female candidates, men were supposed to compete with male candidates.
The quota system was called *Varannan Damernas*, which literally means ‘Every other one for the Ladies’ and referred not only to the commission of inquiry report but also to a rural dance custom in Sweden, where women and men take turns asking for a dance (also known as ‘democratic dancing’). Even though this measure had the same function as a quota, the concept seemed to soften demands for a radical distribution of power to women at the expense of men by providing associations to sympathetic rules of ‘taking turns’. As such, it avoided any reference to conflicts of interests between the sexes, which in turn resonated with the hegemonic discourse of ‘consensus’ and ‘equality’ in Swedish society (Bergqvist 1994, Eduards 2002, Freidenvall et al 2006, Freidenvall & Krook 2007). Thus, at the same time as there is an internal logic of competition built into the political system, there seems to be a parallel logic for women: women cannot compete with men. Women were, thus, constituted as loyal colleagues that were - peacefully and in solidarity with the common cause - supposed to adhere to the rules. Furthermore, women and men were constituted as partners courting each other, thus implying a reproduction of a heterosexual matrix in politics.

**Institutional outcome**

The discursive framings of women’s political representation resulted in several important outcomes. One significant outcome was the establishment of the Advisory Council for Equality between Women and Men in 1972 (Bergqvist 1994, Sainsbury 2005). This council was connected to the Cabinet and Thage G Peterson, the permanent under-secretary of state of the Prime Minister was its first chair. A second significant outcome was the introduction of special measures by the political parties to increase the number of women elected (Wängnerud 2001). In 1972, The Liberal party adopted a policy whereby a minimum of 40 percent of each sex were to be placed on internal party committees and boards. In 1974, this policy was extended to cover the party lists, and in 1984 the Liberal party adopted the zipper system as a recommended strategy. The dominant Social Democratic party responded by introducing a general policy in 1972 on the importance of more women in politics, in 1978 a new policy was adopted stipulating that the party lists should be comprised of the same proportion of women as women members in the party district and in 1993 the zipper system was introduced according to which woman and men are placed alternately on the party lists. Similar patterns can be found in the other political parties (Freidenvall 2006). Thus, once one party had introduced a new policy, it triggered other parties to follow suit. Over time, as each party reacted to an electoral threat from close political competitors, the perceived need to nominate women triggered more or less all of the parties on the political spectrum to comply with the new discourse on women’s and men’s right to equal representation and to demonstrate their commitment to equal rights (cp Matland & Studlar 1996). Political scientist Lena Wängnerud argues that a competition to win female voters began (Wängnerud 2001). From a discursive institutionalist perspective, it can be argued that a process of translation took place which triggered a shift in the existing order of interpretation and action. As an increasing number of parties introduced special measures to promote women politicians and as these measures were gradually radicalized, from general goals and targets to party quotas for some parties, the proportion of women nominated and elected gradually increased.

**IV. Limits to a discursive institutionalist approach**

At the same time as there are certain advantages of discursive institutionalism – such as its potential to explain the dynamics of change and continuity by its emphasis on ideas
and discursive interactions, there are some critical problems related to it. One problem relates to the concern about using discourse analysis as a single approach. When discourse – or text – is used in isolation and when context is not taken into account, the approach runs the risk of being seen as intentional and, thus, as faced with the same kind of criticism as is raised against postmodernist approaches (Annesley 2006, Schmidt 2005). Another problem relates to establishing of causality. This concern primarily revolves around the difficulties in separating discourse from other variables and, thus, identifying it as the independent variable. Schmidt suggests that instead of abandoning discourses all together, scholars should ask when discourse is a cause: “when does discourse serve to reconceptualize interests rather than just reflect them, to chart new institutional paths instead of simply following old ones, and to reframe cultural norms rather than only reify them” (Schmidt 2005:14).

Another concern revolves around the question of subject agency within discourse methodology or the extent to which a subject can use discourse or is constituted by it. Is it possible to step in and out of discourses? To what extent are we able to use discourses for political ends? Schmidt’s use of discourse is miles away from the usage recommended by many discourse analysts.

Carol Lee Bacchi makes a distinction between **discourse analysis** and **analysis of discourses**. In the discourse analysis tradition, the aim is to identify “how individual subjects negotiate their way through pervasive but conflicting ‘discursive structures/meanings’” (Stapleton & Wilson 2004:46 cited in Bacchi 2005:199). In the analysis of discourses tradition, on the other hand, the task is to identify and analyzing discourses within texts, such policy speeches and documents. Although the differences between the two traditions are not clear cut, they differ in terms of the issue of subject agency, “over whether we ought to think of subjects primarily as discourse users or as constituted in discourse” (Bacchi 2005:200). Thus, there is a tension between those that argue that actors may use discourse and those regarding discourse as structures/meanings that constitute subjects.

Some scholars argue that it is important to analyze both “how people use discourse and how discourse uses people” (Potter & Wetherell 1990:213-14 cited in Bacchi 2005:200). Bacchi herself calls for a dual-focus agenda, in which attention is paid both “to the ways in which we are all in discourses, understood as institutionally supported and culturally influenced interpretive and conceptual schemas and signs and to the active deployment of language, including concepts and categories, for political purposes” (Bacchi 2005:207). Other scholars apply frame analysis techniques. Frame analysis represents a different strand, not necessarily based on discourse theory or the analysis of discourse, that stresses the conscious shaping of political demands – the strategic framing – in order to achieve certain outcomes (See for instance Verloo 2001, Benford & Snow 2000). In the further development of discursive institutionalist theory, these issues need to be seriously considered.

**Conclusion**

With the starting point that little attention has been paid to discourses in institutionalist literature and the fact that discourses are not theorized as institutions in discourse literature, this paper has aimed at closing the gap between these two schools by showing how discursive and political cultural context shapes what measures are proposed, how they are talked about, what measures are possible and are pursued and prospects and limits of these discourses in relation to real breakthroughs in women’s political representation. It has also shown how discourses are as much – or even more – powerful than formal institutions, other informal institutions. In an attempt to develop a new framework for analyzing discourses as institutions, the paper also addresses some of the
limitations of the discursive institutionalist approach, such as its unclear views on subject agency, which is so critical in traditional institutionalist approaches.

References


