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GENDER AND THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH: DEFINING A NEW RESEARCH AGENDA

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Abstract:

This paper sets out a research agenda for explaining and evaluating women’s presence in the executive branch of government. We bring together two bodies of literature, (feminist) institutionalism and executive branch scholarship, to craft a research agenda for studying women’s access to and roles within executive institutions. In so doing, we show how feminist approaches shed light on some of the unanswered questions common in executive branch research. We argue that (feminist) institutionalism has two advantages over traditional approaches to studying executives: 1) an explicit assumption that the rules and practices that characterize political institutions reflect unequal power relations, particularly those based on socially constructed identities such as gender, race, or ethnicity; and 2) a focus on the informal dimensions of institutions. Bringing together these two literatures will permit researchers to learn which institutional arrangements are more likely to facilitate women’s access to executive office and which arrangements, norms, and practices obstruct women's access to and success within the executive branch.

INTRODUCTION:

More women than ever before are reaching the executive branch of government. Currently, 14 women hold the top political executive office in their countries. And in the last decade, the principle of gender parity in cabinet has become popular, with leaders in countries like France, Finland, Chile, and most recently, Italy, appointing cabinets where men and women are equally represented. Today, there are 10 countries where women hold close to half of the posts in cabinet. These trends have prompted gender scholars to turn their attention to the executive branch, an area that, given the historical paucity of women, has not been a focus for women and politics researchers.

Yet understanding the gendered dimensions of the executive branch requires a new approach. Gender and executives literature to date has either drawn on the theoretical approaches developed for women in parliaments\(^1\) or it has drawn on existing executive branch scholarship without subjecting its categories and approaches to critical gendered analysis. This is inadequate because the categorisations and typologies used in the early research were

\(^1\) See Annesley, Beckwith, Engeli and Franceschet (2012) 'Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Executive Leadership.' Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, USA, April.
designed to answer different questions than those posed by gender scholars. Yet the addressing the questions that gender scholars are now beginning to ask would also contribute to broader knowledge about the changes and trends that are common in executive institutions in both presidential and parliamentary democracies.

In this paper, we ask how processes surrounding cabinet recruitment and operations are premised on ideas and expectations about gender, that is, the different roles, strengths, and capacities of men and women. We believe that doing so will also contribute to the broader scholarship on the executive branch, by showing how gender is one of the factors that shapes recruitment to cabinet as well as the internal distribution of power within the executive branch.

Throughout the paper, we advocate an institutionalist approach to the study of recruitment to the executive branch, but one that takes feminist claims about the gendered nature of institutions seriously. As such, our goal is to identify the formal rules and informal practices that structure recruitment to and day-to-day practices within the executive. Then we can determine how these rules and practices are gendered and thereby create distinct opportunities and obstacles for men and women who seek access to and career success within executive institutions.

Yet these tasks are made difficult by the relative lack of knowledge – even within mainstream scholarship – about the inner workings of the executive branch. There is much that we do not know about cabinet recruitment and the “hidden life” of institutions within executive the branch. The purpose of this paper is to outline the state of knowledge on executive institutions, and to argue that a gendered institutionalist approach can not only help us to understand the gendered dimensions of the executive, but also shed light on the poorly understood aspects of core political institutions. We thereby seek to create dialogue among and contribute to knowledge about literatures that have tended to remain distinct: executive branch scholarship, institutionalist research, and gender and politics research.

The paper is divided into two sections. First, we outline the main research questions that emerge from looking at executive branch scholarship through a gendered lens. We identify the unanswered or unexplored questions of executive branch scholars that are central to explaining women’s participation in executives. Second, we identify the main strengths of taking an institutionalist approach to the study of executives. More specifically, we show how a feminist institutionalist approach helps sheds light not only on women’s participation in executives but, more important, contributes to knowledge about the informal and ideational elements of executive branch institutions. Doing so provides a deeper understanding of how executives work, and also how they are changing in light of broader social and political change as well as feminist advocacy. In our
conclusion, we outline the research agendas that emerge when we bring together executive branch scholarship with gender and politics research.

I. Gender and the Executive Branch: Main Research Questions

What do we want to know? Essentially, we want to understand and explain gendered access to executive institutions. That means that we want to know when, why, and how women are recruited as ministers or chief executives. We also want to know what factors shape their capacity to act or ability to succeed once in office. That means that we need to understand how gender shapes the distribution of and ability to exercise power within the executive. In essence, then, we need to examine the formation and functioning of cabinets to understand how rules and norms of access and the internal distribution of power and influence is shaped by gendered ideas and structures. Gendered ideas refer to assumptions and expectations about the capacities, strengths, and appropriate roles of men and women, while gendered structures refer to things like the sexual division of labour which places greater caretaking burdens on women, permitting them less opportunities to accrue resources (like time, money, or employment/political experience) that translate into political opportunities.

Understanding the gendered dimensions of executive office matters enormously. In most political systems around the world, power resides in the executive branch, which is \textquoteleft the most visible locus of political power\textquoteright (Cotta 1991, 174). Appreciating this fact helps us to understand why having more women in parliament does not always lead to the kinds of policy changes that equality advocates wish to achieve. According to Laver and Shepsle, \textquoteleft it is difficult in most parliamentary democracies for anyone outside the executive to have a significant impact on the process of legislation\textquoteright (1996, 3). Current trends make women's relative absence in the executive branch even more problematic for those who wish to achieve feminist policy goals. That is because a growing concern among political scientists is the \textquoteleft presidentialisation\textquoteright of politics, that is, the processes by which power is becoming ever more concentrated in the office of the chief executive (Poguntke & Webb 2005). In this context, the global diffusion of gender quotas, while desirable in terms of increasing women's presence in parliaments around the world, is not likely to produce significant gains in terms of women-friendly policy outcomes. If we assume that women's presence is necessary to change policy, it becomes ever more important to examine the processes that help or hinder women's access to executive institutions.

Despite the importance of the executive branch, systematic knowledge about it remains limited (Blondel 1988, 15; Bonavecchi & Scartascini 2012; Dogan 1989, 2). As recently as 2006, one scholar asks: \textquoteleft where are the theories, the models, and the typologies of executive government in parliamentary systems...?\textquoteright (Rhodes 2006, 323). Two tendencies in executive branch scholarship account for the relative lack of knowledge accumulation. First, most studies
focus on just one aspect of the executive branch, whether that is cabinet and ministerial recruitment, the presidency/prime ministership and pathways to chief executive office, or the main policy role and internal decision-making processes within cabinet and executive branch institutions. Second, much of the work on executives focuses on single countries, single regions, or on executives in presidential or parliamentary systems. Less work is truly comparative, aimed at constructing broad theories or typologies that take into account the executive branch as a whole, and could be applied cross-nationally and across different types of political system. Our work seeks to address this, and, most important, identifies how greater attention to gender will invariably shed light on poorly understood dimensions of the executive branch more generally.

Yet understanding the gendered dimensions of the executive branch requires a prior understanding of the logic and functioning of the executive branch along with the main factors that produce variation in the types of ministers recruited, the pathways to chief executive office, and the power relations that shape the day-to-day functioning of executive institutions. In the remainder of this section, we identify the main questions and concerns that are addressed by executive branch scholars, outline the main approaches to studying the executive branch, and finally, outline the main research questions for gender scholars that emerge from the existing state of knowledge about the executive branch.

Core concerns in executive branch scholarship

What are the research questions explored by scholars of the executive branch? Probably the most common concern is cabinet formation and recruitment: What determines who becomes a minister? What ‘types’ of individuals are recruited into cabinet (experts, generalists, partisan v. non-partisans/independents)? Another core concern in the literature is how power is internally distributed in cabinets, and what factors determine cabinet stability and instability (the frequency of shuffles). Common to scholarship on the executive branch are efforts to elucidate both the legal rules and structured practices that shape cabinet formation, and thereby determine the types of individuals recruited into the executive branch. A particular concern is whether ministers are partisan/generalists or non-partisan/experts or technocrats. Where coalition governments are the norm, researchers are interested in how portfolio allocation among the parties is determined. These studies are also concerned with the factors that create stability and instability in cabinets, and, by extension, governments. Below, we divide the executive branch literature into three areas: i) large-N studies of ministers’ profiles; ii) coalition theory, and iii) cabinet functioning and role of parties. Throughout, we note how these approaches have been employed (or not) by the smaller, emerging scholarship on women and

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2 There are some exceptions to this, for example, Paul Pennings (2000).
cabinet, identifying places where gender scholars may ask different sorts of questions, which could, in turn further contribute to the general literature.

i) large-N studies of ministers’ backgrounds and career trajectories

This is presumably the largest body of literature within executive branch scholarship. Here, the goal is to determine the demographic profiles of ministers as well as their professional backgrounds to get a sense of what types of individuals, with which characteristics, are recruited into cabinet. The early literature examined the characteristics and profiles of ministers in different countries, developing a typology of ministers according to their background prior to appointment to cabinet (Blondel and Thiébault 1991). Notably, the profiles of individuals recruited to cabinet was presumed to result from the ‘different conditions under which parliamentary government operates in the different countries’ (Blondel 1991, 3). These differences produced two distinct ideal types of ministers: the ‘generalist,’ whose skills were primarily political, and whose training derived from lengthy careers in parliament, and the ‘specialist,’ who lacked an extensive parliamentary background but had knowledge and expertise about a particular policy area which would translate into effective management of a government department.

Notably, the work of Blondel and his collaborators on cabinets in western Europe explicitly rejects comparisons with presidential systems. Blondel explains that cabinets in parliamentary systems are fundamentally unlike their presidential counterparts in that only in the former are ministers tasked with the potentially competing tasks of representing the public and their parties while also serving as policy and department managers. In presidential systems, in contrast, ‘ministers have an unambiguous function; they are appointed by the president to deal exclusively with the affairs of their department’ (1991, 6).

This assumption is called into question, however, by recent developments within the presidential systems of the United States and Latin America, where public expectations about the inclusion of women and other under-represented groups as well as the need to maintain congressional coalitions (in Latin America) do not permit presidents to select ministers solely on the basis of technical or managerial expertise. Escobar–Lemmon and Taylor–Robinson note, for instance, that presidents are judged on the diversity and inclusiveness of their cabinets and must, therefore, be aware ‘of the picture – often a literal photo in the press – presented by their cabinet’ (2009, 4). Empirical studies like Borelli’s (2002) examination of presidential cabinets in the U.S. support the idea that presidents are attentive to the public’s expectations about diversity.

Thus, the need for ministers with multiple skills, capacities, and descriptive characteristics may be present in presidential systems as well. In Chile, for instance, where coalition governments are the norm, cabinet formation involves
a careful balancing of partisan and public expectations. As such, individual ministers must be simultaneously capable of serving as liaisons between their party and the government (as in parliamentary systems) while also possessing some knowledge (or ability to acquire knowledge) about a particular policy area. Increasingly, ministers are expected to represent broader social groups as well, like women or youth. Indeed, it is possible that cabinets in both presidential and parliamentary systems are increasingly subject to similar pressures which shape expectations about ministers as well as their actual work, which, in turn shape the process of cabinet recruitment. As such, there is a need for more general cross-national research that includes both presidential and parliamentary systems and which explores the emergence and consequences of new representative pressures on presidents and prime ministers.

Blondel’s work, along with the contributions of country experts included in various volumes on cabinets and ministerial recruitment in western Europe laid the foundation for subsequent studies, some of which ask slightly different questions, yet rely heavily on the insights and categories produced by earlier scholarship. A number of different concerns appear within the newer wave of studies of ministerial recruitment. Dowding and Dumont (2009) explore the structural, legal, and political factors that shape individuals’ appointment to and firing or ‘deselection’ from cabinet. The country case studies in Dowding and Dumont’s book are similar to those in Blondel’s earlier work in that they are based on the profiles and careers of ministers, and from that data, seek to generalise about the political or strategic factors that shape ministerial selection. Other scholars look at the consequences of decentralisation and regionalism on cabinet formation and ministerial careers (Rodríguez 2011a). Work in this tradition also involves in-depth studies of single countries, including Kerby (2009), Rodríguez (2011b), and Vogel (2009).

Researchers interested in women’s access to cabinet who have worked with these categories also highlight how ministerial recruitment to cabinet follows ‘generalist’ and ‘specialist’ conventions. Davis’ (1997) study of women’s appointments to west European cabinets found that women are more likely to be recruited in countries with a ‘specialist’ tradition for selecting ministers. In specialist systems, where there is a strong bureaucratic tradition, it is more common for political outsiders to be recruited to cabinet. Generalist systems, on the other hand, emphasise the representative aspects of cabinets, which means that ministers need to have established themselves as strong performers in parliamentary debates. According to Davis, ‘women’s more circumscribed participation in debates means they are likely to be passed over in generalist systems’ (1997, 43).

Unfortunately, comparative work on women’s recruitment to cabinet remains limited. It is also notable that, in contrast to Davis’ study, which draws heavily on cabinet scholarship, other studies draw more from the women and politics literature. Escobar–Lemmon and Taylor–Robinson’s (2005) study of
women in Latin American cabinets employs a supply and demand model borrowed from the scholarship on gender and candidate recruitment for parliamentary elections. Supply–side factors include things like advanced education, work and professional experience, as well as legislative experience. As more women enter the supply pools, women’s cabinet representation is expected to grow. The study finds, however, that the only supply–side factor to matter is the number of women in the legislature (835).

Yet the executive branch literature reviewed above makes clear that existing recruitment rules and practices, most broadly, whether generalist or specialist cabinets are the norm, determines what the supply pools are. In other words, the supply of ministers varies cross–nationally, depending on the traditions and norms that exist in a particular political system. Hence, understanding women’s presence requires greater attention to the formal and informal rules associated with of cabinet formation, more specifically, noting how existing practices and rules create opportunities or obstacles for women’s appointment.

In their study of women’s access to cabinets, Krook and O’Brien (2012, 843) acknowledge the importance of the rules and practices that flow from different institutional configurations, hypothesising that ‘institutions might shape women’s prospects to the degree that they structure the incentives of political leaders to be more attentive to descriptive characteristics’. Their cross–national study of 117 countries finds support for the role of institutions, but finds that women’s status within the political elite is even more decisive (851). Thus, rather than thinking about supply–side factors like education and workforce participation in broad terms, Krook and O’Brien’s findings point to the relevance of women’s existing presence in parliaments, and more importantly, as parliamentary leaders and chief executives (presidents and prime ministers).

Most of the women and cabinet literature is concerned not simply with the numbers of women appointed to cabinet, but also with the types of portfolios women are likely to receive. Researchers have documented the tendency for women to be appointed to posts with rather less power, influence, or prestige (Escobar–Lemmon and Taylor–Robinson 2009; Krook and O’Brien 2012).

But while quantitative studies reveal patterns in the ‘types’ of ministers recruited, i.e., demographic traits, political profiles, and professional backgrounds, they do not reveal the causal mechanisms that produce and reproduce those traits (e.g., the predominance of men). For this, researchers need to supplement the findings from large–N studies with qualitative case studies. Process–tracing and elite interviewing in single or comparative case studies can shed light on the informal yet highly regularised dimensions of cabinet recruitment: the norms and practices that lead to particular types of ministers being selected. Gender scholars also need to uncover the way that gendered behavioural norms and expectations create hierarchies that shape
women’s presence in supply pools. Finally, gender scholars would be interested in the consequences of gendered portfolio distribution: how/why does it matter that women are more likely to hold particular types of portfolios? This final question would connect the gender and cabinet literature to emerging studies on women’s pathways to chief executive office.

ii) Coalition theory

This approach uses some version of game theory or rational choice theory to model coalition bargaining and cabinet formation. Core concerns include the distribution of portfolios across coalition partners and the overall stability and duration of coalition governments. Although some of the works in this category are relatively ‘thin,’ that is, very few of the contextual factors in which potential coalition partners bargain are considered theoretically relevant, other work, for example Strom, Budge, and Laver (1994) is critical of the ‘institution free’ models of government formation. Their own model takes into account both formal institutions, namely the legal or constitutional rules about the size and composition of cabinet, investiture votes, and the degree of discretion enjoyed by heads of state in inviting parties to form governments as well as party norms, and even external societal actors (Strom, Budge, and Laver 1994).

But the main goal of much of this literature is to predict the partisan make–up of cabinet. Neto and Samuels (2010), compare presidential and parliamentary democracies to determine how the separation of powers affects whether partisans or independents are recruited to cabinet and the extent to which portfolio allocation is proportional to parties in a coalition. Laver and Shepsle (1996) seek to build a predictive model of government formation that is sufficiently general to apply across parliamentary democracies with different patterns of politics. Their model of cabinet formation is based on the assumption that appointments are policy–driven, that is, individual ministers are selected based on their role as carriers of particular policy positions that derive from their partisan identity (8).

Notably, Laver and Shepsle claim to be interested only in the partisan identity of ministers, arguing that ‘personal idiosyncrasies aside, politicians can be expected to toe their party’s line’ (1996, 13). Yet at the same time, they acknowledge the symbolic or signalling dimensions of cabinet appointments. That is, leaders can send signals to voters about the policy intentions and overall position a government will take based on the reputations of the ministers appointed. This is particularly important in posts like finance, where appointing someone with a reputation as a fiscal conservative sends a strong message about a government’s policy intentions.

Despite this acknowledgment that reputational identity matters, Laver and Shepsle’s model does not take into account other factors that have been found to
matter greatly for cabinet recruitment in some countries, such as region or linguistic group. This makes it less useful for gender scholars seeking to uncover the ways in which identities and considerations other than partisanship matter for cabinet formation. Clearly, it is useful to think about cabinets and individual ministers as more than simply carriers of policy ideas, but also as representing other politically relevant identities, such as region, generation, ethnicity and gender. Assuming that individuals are exclusively carriers of policy preferences also does not help to explain how cabinet posts are frequently rewards for loyalty and party service. In sum, the relatively narrow focus of this approach on partisanship and cabinet stability/duration makes it less helpful for gender scholars who want to know why particular individuals with a range of descriptive characteristics are (not) recruited into cabinet.

iii) cabinet functioning

This body of literature explores the day-to-day life of cabinets, the way that power is internally distributed, how, where, and by whom decisions are made, and whether cabinet decision-making is guided by norms of consensus and negotiation or unilateralism. Researchers working in this subfield are also interested in the role of parties in cabinet government and the relationship between party leaders and ministers. Notably, much of this work is explicitly comparative. For example, the cross-national study led by Blondel and Müller–Rommel (1993) begins with the assumption that the structure of cabinets, namely whether they are formed by single parties or coalitions, or whether parties are factionalised versus unified, is consequential for the daily life of cabinets and the distribution of power and decision-making within. A key goal, therefore, is to see if some structures are more conducive to collective and collegial decision-making in an environment that is relatively free of conflict. Other scholarship begins with the assumption that power has been centralised, for example, the ‘core executive’ approach (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990; Elgie 2010; Rhodes 1995) and recent work on the ‘presidentialisation’ of politics (Poguntke and Webb 2007).

Unlike much of the work on ministerial recruitment and coalition theory, this scholarship tends to employ qualitative and even ethnographic methods. Attempts to capture who has power, whether there are internal hierarchies in cabinet and how decisions are made will necessarily require researchers to ask those who have participated in government, whether through surveys (as in Blondel and Müller–Rommell 1993), or through elite interviews, or even to observe them directly, as did Rhodes (2011) in his ethnographic study of the British executive. Often, the researchers’ own data is supplemented with the written word of former ministers in the form of biographies. Notably, when trying to determine whether cabinets contain internal power hierarchies or whether key decisions are taken by cabinet as a whole, by some smaller group, or whether key decisions are influenced by the chief executive and her own staff,
researchers must dig deep and even be sceptical of the outward or public face that ministers and leaders offer. Andeweg notes, for example that ‘the concept of the inner cabinet is somewhat elusive...in part because in some cases, its very existence may be concealed, and even denied’ (1993, 28; see also Siavelis 2011).

As much as scholars lament our lack of knowledge about the inner workings of executives, we know far more about the internal organisation and daily workings of executives in parliamentary systems than we do in presidential democracies (with the exception of the American presidency). Bonavecchi and Scartascini (2014) point out that we know hardly anything about the organisation of the executive branch in the presidential democracies of Latin America, despite extensive studies of coalition politics and policy–making. Notably, they call for both qualitative and quantitative information about the relationship between cabinets and the ‘presidential centre’ (staffers and advisers to the president) as a way of shedding light on the role played by ministers in policymaking and the internal power relations within executive institutions.

Because of its focus on how power, influence, and decision–making roles are distributed within cabinet, and between cabinet and the chief executive, the scholarship on cabinet functioning in both presidential and parliamentary democracies is very relevant for gender scholars who want to understand the gendered dimensions of daily life in the executive branch. Surprisingly, few studies have investigated how the organisation and practices within executive institutions create distinct obstacles to or opportunities for women’s access and influence within them. An exception is Annesley and Gains’ (2010) study of the gendered dispositions of the British core executive, showing how women’s recruitment and ability to tap into resources and relationships affects their ability to achieve their policy goals and advance equality.

The methods and approaches that characterise this literature are also amenable for investigations of how gender norms and expectations shape relations, networks, and the exercise of power and influence within the executive branch. Gender scholars would, of course, ask rather different questions than have been posed by scholars working in this area. But gender scholars’ findings would be relevant to researchers of cabinets functioning more generally. Some of the relevant questions for scholars include whether the proportion of women affects decision–making, whether hierarchies are more common when women are present in particular proportions, and whether decision–making styles change when there are more women in cabinet.

Presidents and prime ministers around the world are indeed appointing more women to cabinet, often in response to changing societal expectations about who/which identities must be represented in the upper echelons of government. In this way, partisan identities or the distinction between ‘generalist’ and ‘specialist’ are no longer the only relevant identities that constitute a cabinet. These developments pose new research questions for
executive branch scholars, questions that gender scholars have been asking for quite some time. More important, the methods and approaches favoured by gender scholars, particularly those attentive to the power relations embedded in and reproduced by institutions, are likely to yield answers to some of the most pressing questions about the changing nature of cabinets and executive institutions. In the next section, we discuss in more detail what a gendered institutionalist approach would look like, and how it would fill in some of the gaps identified above.

II. A Gendered Institutionalist Approach to the Executive Branch

In this section, we make the case for an institutionalist approach to analyzing women’s recruitment to and trajectories within political executives. Doing so advances both the mainstream executive research and the rapidly expanding gender and politics scholarship on political executives. Our foremost claim is that recruitment to executive office cannot be explained by the aggregate characteristics of ministers nor by the policy expertise that ministrables carry. Rather, we advocate an explicitly institutionalist approach which would hone in on the institutional rules that determine who selects ministers, who is eligible to be chosen, and how these rules are gendered. An institutionalist approach to cabinet functioning would focus on the formal authority structures in the executive branch along with the more informal but regularised practices that determine how power is allocated and how decisions are reached.

There is an absence of an explicitly institutionalist analysis in the academic literature on ministerial recruitment. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that the selection of cabinets is subject to few formal, written rules. However institutionalists are increasingly alert to the need to identify the informal institutions, and these unwritten norms are highly significant for political executives. As Dogan (1989, 9) points out, ‘in theory, a prime minister has the right to hire and fire ministers. In reality, there are many constraints on his choice.’ The formal, written rule in many constitutions will state that chief executives select ministers and allocate ministerial portfolios to them. However, in reality the freedom to appoint ministers is constrained by a range of factors which are rarely written down or documented. Rather they exist as a set of unwritten rules and norms which vary between political sites and even between political parties within a single state. Layered on top of this are strong ideational norms which shape narratives about what kind of person ‘makes a good minister’. Informal rules and ideational norms are more difficult to identify because they are hidden from public scrutiny. However, with appropriate methods they can be identified, for example, in more practitioner or journalist accounts, which our research hopes to capture. By uncovering the gendered institutional rules associated with executive recruitment and operation our research will offer a major contribution to the literature on political executives.
i) What is an institutionalist approach and what does it add to the study of political executives?

In this section we outline the main components of institutionalist analysis, the key analytical questions they raise, and draw from across the range of institutionalist approaches – but notably Historical Institutionalism and Sociological Institutionalism – to shed light on the formal and informal rules associated with recruitment to political executives.

Our rationale for selecting an institutionalist approach to the study of women and political executives is grounded in the belief that ‘political behaviours and political outcomes are best understood by studying the rules and practices that characterize institutions, and the ways in which actors relate to them’ (Lowndes and Roberts 2013, 7). In line with Peters (2005, 164) we contend that ‘institutions do matter, and that they matter more than anything else that could be used to explain political decisions’ such as ministerial recruitment (Peters 2005, 164 – cited in Lowndes and Roberts 2013, 6).

An institutionalist approach to a study of executive identifies the rules which govern the appointment of ministers to executive office. Rules can be broadly defined as constraints to political action. In line with new institutionalist approaches developed since the 1980s we identify as important not just the formal or written rules but also the informal or unwritten rules. Layered on top of this we deem it essential to identify the ideational component of political life, that is the narratives which constrain political action and which are a core component of institutional analysis.

In addition, an institutionalist analysis of executive recruitment and operations is able to shed light on the various way that different kinds of rules distribute power resources. Rules – broadly understood – do not just constrain political actors; they also enable or facilitate political action in a variety of ways. Institutionalist analysis therefore helps us to understand the ways that rules empower certain types of political action and actors more than others.

Following on from this, institutional analysis allows us to identify how rules distribute power in a gendered way. Drawing on the extensive theorising associated with the feminist institutionalist network (Kenny 2006; Krook and Mackay 2012) we will use institutional analysis to investigate whether formal rules, informal norms and ideational narratives are gendered so as to distribute power within executives towards male actors. This in turn has the capacity to help to explain the unequal distribution of ministerial post between men and women and the gendered patterns of ministerial portfolio allocation as well as operations within cabinet.

Increasingly institutional analysis is concerned not just with identifying the rules which constrain or empower political actors, but also in the dynamic nature
of rules and the mechanisms through which they change over time. Institutionalist scholars have moved away from initial assumptions about the tenacious nature of rules to uncover a series of mechanism through which institutional rules and norms change – and can be changed by purposeful actors. These include displacement, layering and conversion. Georgina Waylen’s Understanding Institutional Change project\(^3\) is leading the way in uncovering the gendered implications of institutional change in political institutions. Particularly important are changing norms of who, or which groups, must be represented in cabinets.

Finally, as Lowndes and Roberts (2013) point out, institutionalist analysis is also an ‘engaged approach’ to political change. They argue that identifying and exposing the impact of rules on political actors, actions and power gives us a way to try to reconfigure institutional rules, for example, to enhance gender equality. Indeed much of the scholarship associated with Feminist Institutionalism is concerned with identifying ways of changing institutions as well as unpacking why new formal institutions with good intentions regarding gender equality often deliver much of the same often as a consequence of the unwritten rules and narratives which prevail (Mackay 2009, Chappell 2014).

Thus, for institutionalist the key analytical questions are (Lowndes and Roberts 2013, 9–10):

- What are the formal ‘rules of the game’ within a particular political arena?
- What are the dominant practices that are not actually written down?
- Are there gaps between the formal rules and the way things ‘really work’?
- Are there frequently rehearsed ‘stories’ that explain why people act in one way rather than another?
- What do actors think will happen if they do not follow rules or observe dominant practices?
- How do actors circumvent, or seek to adapt, rules and practices?
- Do different actors relate to rules differently?
- Are there alternative rules and practices ‘bubbling under’?
- Are new stories emerging about how things could work in the future?
- How do actors react to those who want to change the rules?

ii) Rules, Power, Change and Gender in the study of political executives

**RULES, PRACTICES AND NARRATIVES:** First things first: what do institutionalists mean by rules? Political institutions are the ‘rules of the game’ that we impose on ourselves to reduce the uncertainties associated with political action (North 1990). Formal rules are the rules that are ‘formally constructed and written

\(^3\) see [http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/disciplines/politics/research/uic/](http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/disciplines/politics/research/uic/)
down’ (Lowndes and Roberts 2013, 53) in the form of a constitution, terms of reference, code of conduct, regulations or policies etc. These can easily be identified and studied through the ‘tools of the lawyers and the historian’ (Rhodes 1997, 68 – cited in Lowndes and Roberts 2013, 54). Also, actors who do not adhere to formal rules can be formally sanctioned in a variety of ways.

Formal rules on cabinet recruitment will include what is stated in the constitution: for example, who can be a minister? Must s/he be member of parliament? If so, which house? Formal rules on recruitment may also address who has the power to appoint ministers; this usually lies with the Prime Minister or President. Formal rules may also extend to the permitted size of cabinet and whether the PM has the authority to change the number of ministers. These formal rules on the executive might intersect with rules governing other related organisations which shape ministerial recruitment. For example, the Labour parties of the UK, Australia and New Zealand have traditionally enforced a formal rule that ministers are chosen through election by the parliamentary party / caucus. The slate of ministerial nominees is then presented to the incoming PM who may then allocate portfolios (Punnett 1964, Weller 2007).

Perhaps as a consequence of the informal origins of cabinets, not much is stated in terms of formal rules about cabinet recruitment. There is, for example, no formal job description relating to the desirable characteristics of ministers or a process of application. Increasingly rules exist regarding the desired conduct of ministers once in office. Given the original and ongoing informal nature of cabinet, to understand the rules associated with executive recruitment it is imperative to focus in on the informal, unspoken rules of executive recruitment and operation as well as the formal written rules. What are the unwritten, hidden rules which facilitate and constrain political or policy actors’ access to the pinnacle of political life?

New institutionalist analysis is increasingly engaged with identifying and analysing the informal rules that coexist with formal rules. Chappell and Waylen (2012) for example note the need to examine the ‘hidden’ aspects of institutions, by which they mean going beyond the formal rules to examine the informal rules and practices that give institutions their shape. More specifically, they argue for the need to theorize the interplay between formal and informal aspects of institutions (pp 1–2). The challenge of studying informal aspects of institutions lies in the very fact that they are often simply the taken–for–granted and unquestioned way of doing things—–that is to say, they are seen as ‘natural and immutable’ (2012, 3). Note, however, that sometimes, informal practices are consciously hidden because they actually contradict formal rules or normative principles like fairness and equality (Helmike and Levitksy 2005). Institutionalists scholars have also alerted to the danger of ‘concept stretching’ – that once we include informal rules there is a potential for everything to be categorised as an institution.
The literature on informal institutions contains a multiplicity of definitions, with some treating it as a residual category, others are cultural traditions, others as moral norms. For Helme and Levitsky, informal institutions do not stem from shared values (as do norms), but rather, shared expectations (which may or may not be normative). For Lowndes and Roberts (2013, 41) informal rules are best characterised as ‘they we do things around here’ or by Hall’s (1986) concept of Standard Operating Procedures – ‘the specific rules of behaviour that are agreed upon and [...] followed by agents, whether explicitly or tacitly’ (cited in Lowndes and Roberts (2013, 47). Lowndes and Roberts (2013, 47) usefully clarify that, ‘informal institutional rules – or what we call ‘practices’ – are [...] distinct from personal habits or ‘rules of thumb’: they are specific to a particular political or governmental setting, they are recognized by actors (if not always adhered to), have a collective (rather than personal) effect, and can be described and explained to the researcher’.

Of foremost significance in Lowndes and Roberts’ definition of informal institutions is that they are ‘recognised by actors’ and they are subject to external enforcement by third parties. This is distinct from distinct from conventions which are self-enforcing (2013, 51). Though informal institutions are notoriously ‘hidden’ from sight, as they are recognised by political actors, they can be described by actors as ‘stories frequently rehearsed’.

How does conceptualising institutions as ‘the way we do things around here’ help to explain recruitment to executive office? Our approach identifies the need for detailed empirical research into the informal institutions that facilitate the path to executive office for some actors and constrain / close it down for others. This does not exist in the current literature nor in documents of formal rules. However, these ‘stories frequently rehearsed’ can be gleaned from accounts by practitioners (autobiographies, elite interviews) as well as expert observers (newspaper commentators and pundits).

In the UK, known for its ‘unwritten’ constitution’, in absence of many formal rules on cabinet recruitment, former minister Gerald Kaufman’s (1997) book How to be a Minister usefully illuminates some of the key informal rules associated with ministerial recruitment or ‘way things are done’ in the UK, which go way beyond the shared personal characteristics of ministers or their policy competence to include broader representative, political and interpersonal considerations.

Firstly, Kaufman confirms that ministerial appointments are the ‘prerogative of the Prime Minister’ (p. 4). In the selection, ‘some Prime Ministers [...] seek to create an administration consisting entirely of political clones of themselves [...] though, Prime Ministers face the need to provide representation for the various ideological strands of their parties, partly in order to achieve an equitable balance, partly to keep troublesome nuisances quiet’ (p. 3). There is also a need, even in what is a traditionally unitary state, to fulfill requirement for
geographical representation: ‘Being Welsh or Scots is also a help to the Conservative Party, because of the need to fill numerous positions at the Welsh and Scottish Offices. It does no harm in the Labour Party either, but Labour has so many Scots and Welsh MPs that they have to take their chance with the rest, though naturally receiving preference for the Welsh and Scottish Office posts’ (p. 7–8). There may also be requirements for the PM to recruit individuals with certain professional qualifications: ‘being a barrister, and preferably a QC, also helps, since every Prime Minister has to find suitable candidates for Lord Chancellor and for four English and Scottish law officers’ (p. 8).

On the part of ministers, Kaufman notes that ‘an obligatory first step is to become a Member of Parliament or – in the case of the Conservative party, even preferably – a peer’ [= member of the House of Lords] (p. 1). Once in parliament, ‘the first and most important rule is: be noticed’ (p. 2). ‘but not, however, by being too noticeable. Rowdiness in the House, being named by the Speaker, perpetual rebellion, may all gain headlines and even lead to popularity in one’s constituency. They are not, however, a certain guarantee of office’ (p. 3). He adds that ‘over-exposure at Question Time is not recommended’ (p. 5).

What other unspoken characteristics or qualifications facilitate the path to ministerial office? Kaufman notes that ability is not necessarily its own reward, but it certainly helps: ‘It pays to be able to speak well in the House’ and ‘It pays also to achieve a reputation for having a competent grasp of a subject’ (p. 5). ‘Work in a committee can help’. ‘The speakers who attract the greatest attention at party Meetings are those who attend reasonably often but speak only occasionally, though with knowledge and authority: MPs always respect someone who has done his homework. It is serious activity of this kind which gets a member talked about approvingly by his colleagues, such talk inevitably reaching the leader through the acknowledged conduit of his parliamentary Private Secretary. The party leader always makes a point of attending Party Meetings’ (p. 6)

However, the strongest predictors of ministerial recruitment appear to be loyalty and service as a Parliamentary Private Secretary to the leader. Kaufman states that that ‘genuine loyalty [...] is [...] a rightly valued quality which is properly rewarded’ (p. 3) and ‘being Parliamentary Private Secretary to the leader, whether in government or Opposition, it itself almost a guarantee of office’ (p. 6).

Kaufman’s influential narrative gives us a strong insider account of ‘the way things are done’ in the UK. This is an example of a ‘story frequently rehearsed’ which gets to the heart of the informal rules of ministerial appointment in the UK system which cannot be gleamed from formal sources or accessed with the tools of the lawyer and historian, though the claims of ‘how things are done around here’ can of course be tested empirically, for example,
through interviews. Indeed preliminary field research with Ministers on the UK confirms many of these ‘stories frequently rehearsed’.

What is missing from this type of account, however, is the gendered nature and impact of formal rules and practices. As feminist institutionalist analysis helps to elucidate, formal rules can exclude women from political institutions such as cabinet, and these can be layered with informal norms and ideational narratives which further constrain women’s access to executive office (Annesley and Gains 2010). Taking a historical institutionalist perspective, women’s access to ministerial office was originally formally closed down by suffrage rules which permitted just men to vote and stand for election. In other words, cabinets were established at a time when women were excluded from that forum. As HI scholars argue, the institutional configuration at the time of formation perpetuates into the present. Later, as women’s access to cabinet was made possible by their presence in parliament, the informal rules, the ways ‘things are done around here’, would have been strongly established and might serve to constrain women’s access to cabinet. Women may not have knowledge of or access to unwritten rules, such as the ones highlighted by Kaufman. What is more, informal rules associated with cabinet recruitment are reinforced by gendered hidden rules elsewhere in a society, most explicitly with regards the expected roles of men and women in public and private life. These expectations often serve to exclude women from informal elite networks, especially when these networks are reinforced through activities that take place in the evenings or on weekends where women are expected to be caring for their families.

This is further reinforced by an ideational aspect to ministerial recruitment, for example regarding the characteristics of ‘what makes a good minister’. This is manifested today in discussions about whether a woman with children can be a minister or conversely (as in the case of former Australian PM Julia Gillard) whether a woman without children can be a good executive actor. Female politicians who are mothers often face a ‘double bind’: being a ‘good’ politician means extended hours working, often traveling, and thus away from home, while being a ‘good’ mother means prioritising one’s children over one’s job. For women, conforming to one set of expectations means violating another.

**POWER.** A key insight gleaned from institutionalist analysis is that formal and informal rules have the capacity to allocate power. From the historical institutionalist school we draw the central insight that institutions are not neutral but distribute power in ways that create opportunities for and constraints on different actors in the pursuit of competing interests. Institutional analysis exposes the ways rules of various kinds distribute power resources. Moreover, HI approaches emphasize that institutional rules set at the formation of the organisation tend to endure and are relatively hard to change. Unequal power dynamics manifest in institutions today derive from the allocation of power at the time of the formation of those rules.
Formal or informal rules and ideational norms on executive recruitment will determine who has the power to make the ministerial selection and who is considered to be in the eligibility pool. In most instances the PM or President has the autonomy to chose his or her ministers, highlighting the strong power of patronage that surrounds the process of ministerial recruitment. However, the power of patronage conferred on the PM / President might be mitigated by a range of associated rules and norms.

For example, chief executives’ power to appoint whomsoever she wants may be constrained by formal or informal norms regarding regional representation. In federal states such as Australia, Canada and Germany there is a strong unwritten expectation that ministers will be recruited to fairly represent a geographical spread (Spiegel 2013, McLaughlin 2013) and even in unitary states such as the UK, there is a clear expectation that at least one minister will be from Wales and one from Scotland.

Similarly a Prime Minster’s power to appoint minister may be curtailed by rules within his / her party which empowers elected MPs get to elect cabinet members. This long-standing formal party rule, common to UK, Australian and New Zealand Labour Parties, significantly affects the power dynamics of ministerial recruitment. However in recent years there has been a shift in the power base with PMs Rudd and Gillard in Australia and Labour leader Miliband in the UK reining in the power of the parliamentary party / caucus (discussed below).

Another type of power relationship that is highlighted through institutional analysis relates to gender. Feminists have drawn on institutionalist analysis to demonstrate how formal and informal rules are gendered and the ways power is distributed in ways that traditionally benefits men. A gendered institutionalist approach recognizes that gender constitutes one of the key power bases that shape the functioning of institutions.

A core insight of Feminist Institutionalism is that formal institutions are gendered: power flows to one sex rather than the other as a consequence of the gendered balance of power at the time the institution was established and because of the way that political institution intersect with other gendered institutions, such as the family (Kenny 2006, Krook and Mackay 2012). For example, formal rules on suffrage meant that initially only men were allowed to stand for elected office and therefore women were not eligible for inclusion into cabinets; and formal rules also used to bar married women from employment in the civil service (Chappell and Waylen 2013). While many of these formal bars have now have been lifted, their legacy remains in the form of informal institutions and ideational norms (Mackay and Rhodes 2013, Annesley and Gains 2010). As Chappell & Waylen (2012, 13) point out, ‘earlier rules about gender can survive in an informal guise and continue to operate to enforce the same (old) expectations, relationships and power structures’.
Thus the Feminist Institutionalist approach strongly emphasizes the need to identify and interrogate informal rules in order to capture the gendered power dynamics of institutions, or as Chappell and Waylen (2013) put it, we need to delve into the ‘hidden lives of institutions’, the informal rules which determine who has power and who is excluded from power. We need to ask: how are formal and informal rules gendered? Or how do rules confer advantages and disadvantages to men and women through a privileging of certain types of behaviour of certain types of assumed capacities? Janet Martin, writing about cabinet selection in the U.S., notes how women are excluded: selection involves ‘a process whereby readily available advisors, often close associates from the recent campaign, suggest names and seek out names from past associates.’ Women are rarely present in the group doing the suggesting (1989, 168). Similar processes have been identified in the UK: there is a need to be on the PM’s radar, and women often are not (Kaufman 1997, Annesley and Gains 2010).

A Feminist Institutionalist approach, with its strong focus on informal rules and norms, has the capacity to expose the otherwise taken-for-granted power dynamics of the executive. As Chappell (2006) has argued, when women enter traditionally male-dominated spaces, their very presence can reveal that male dominance and unmask hidden expectations about appropriate behaviour, what she refers to as the gendered ‘logic of appropriateness’.

**INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE.** Institutional rules that constrain actors and establish power dynamics are not necessarily set in stone. Opportunities for institutional change emerge through changes in structure, context and environment and / or through purposeful action on the part of political actors. Scholars of institutions differ in the weight they accord to structural versus agential explanations of institutional change, as well as the time scale required for change to occur. Lowndes and Roberts 2013 (chapter 5) provides an excellent overview of types of institutional change: displacement, layering, drift, conversion, borrowing and remembering.

Lowndes and Roberts (2013, 134) specify that rules, practices and narratives ‘may combine to produce institutional stability over time; but it is also possible for gaps and contradictions to open up, creating instability – and possibilities for change’. These kinds of ‘creative spaces open up […] when the ‘fit’ between different elements of an institutional configuration weakens’ (Lowndes and Roberts 2013, 134). Political actors can exploit these ‘creative spaces’ to bring about institutional change but these spaces can also be created by the agency of political actors in a range of institutional settings.

For Lowndes and Roberts, a core concern of what they refer to as the third phase of institutionalism is the existence of ‘engaged institutionals’. This means that many institutionalist scholars are not just interested in identifying institutional rules and the power they confer but also in using this knowledge to
propose ways of altering institutional configurations to redistribute power. For sure, a core concern of feminist institutionalist analysis is identifying the gendered implications of institutional change and proposing ways to improve institutional rules to promote gender equality (Kenny 2007, Krook and Mackay 2011) and to ensure that institutional change is gendered to achieve this (Waylen UIC project). From this rich scholarship on gendered institutional change has emerged an important insight that new institutions (such as the International Criminal Court or the Scottish Parliament) with explicit feminist intentions remain ‘nested’ in old gendered institutional practices and norms and can therefore easily slip back into old ways.

With relation to recruitment to the core executive, the concern for an engaged feminist institutionalist approach is to identify, challenge and seek to change the institutional rules which contribute to the unequal representation of men and women in executive office. Feminist institutionalism can also address the allocation of ministerial portfolios to men and women and the capacity of male and female ministers to operate effectively within the cabinet system and core executive to achieve their policy goals, though these issues are outside the immediate concerns of this paper.

It is possible to identify instances of how changes in formal rules, practices or narratives has triggered progress in women’s presence in executive office. At the most general level, in many polities there has been a shift in the narrative of representation, emphasising the importance of parity or near-parity representation of women in executive office. When this narrative permeates through to the office of the chief executive, concrete improvements in representation have been delivered – Spain, France and Chile are prime examples. Elsewhere, although narratives have changed, practice has not. For example, ahead of his election in 2010, UK Prime Minister Cameron promised that one-third of his ministers would be women by the end of parliament (2015) but he remains some way off achieving this self-imposed target.

To provide an example of how changes in formal rules and practices can lead to improvements in the recruitment of women to cabinets, we return to the case of Labour Party ministerial selection in the UK and Australia. In both cases, getting elected onto the list of ministerial nominations drawn up by the parliamentary party / caucus is an important step to securing a ministerial post. In the UK the incoming PM is not obliged to adopt this list wholesale, but the practice is that he should take note of it (Kaufman 1997) and the political costs of ignoring it would be high. In Australia the practice has, until relatively recently, been more strictly enforced.

In both cases, this formal rule and practice created an additional hurdle to women seeking ministerial appointment. In the UK, there has traditionally been little turnover on the list (Punnett 1964) and in Australia the practice has been flagged as one of the biggest hurdles to women in executive office (Ryan 1999).
Rule changes over the years have opened up the process of ministerial selection to these Labour parties. In the UK, as a result of feminist campaigning within the party, there have been a series of formal rule changes to secure the appointment of more women to shadow cabinets. First the size of the shadow cabinet overall was increased to create more openings and then quotas and voting rules which specify that ballot papers will be void if a certain number of female candidates are not selected, were introduced. Subsequently the practice of shadow cabinet elections was scrapped and the current leader Miliband is committed to 50% female representation, far beyond what was achieved through the list. In Australia, most recent Labour PMs Rudd and Gillard were permitted to by-pass the practice and make their own ministerial appointments as a ‘reward’ for returning the party to government. Each PM appointed significantly higher numbers of female ministers than had been achieved through internal party selection.

III. Conclusion. Research agenda: what types of studies are needed?

The principal aim of our research is to improve the understanding of when and why women are appointed to political executives, which represent the pinnacle of political power. Our research strategy is to depart from existing scholarship by adopting an explicitly institutionalist approach to explain the recruitment of women to executives, emphasising the significance of the formal and informal rules which constrain and facilitate political action in this process. This approach has significant capacity to improve existing theory of executive formation and allows for a more systematic comparative approach to the study of executive formation, but also to the functioning of executives and women’s performance within them.

By drawing on the insights of feminist institutionalism we will be able to shed light on how the formal and informal rules of executive recruitment are gendered and how institutional rules allocate power in gendered ways between political actors. This departs from the bulk of existing gender and political research on executive recruitment which adopts a broad brush supply-side theoretical approach drawn from the gender and parliaments literature, but overlooks the highly politicised but institutionally regularised process that is undertaken when PMs / Presidents select ministers. Our feminist institutionalist approach will also help identify what needs to change in order to secure something closer to gender parity.

To fulfil the aims of this research agenda we propose a mixed methodological approach which combines thorough, cross-national and longitudinal data collection to capture the numerical presence of women in executive positions world-wide. This will be supplemented by detailed qualitative case study research to capture the formal and informal rules of executive recruitment and operation. What formal rules exist can be captured through constitutions, codes of conduct etc. The informal rules can be identified by consulting media
accounts of ministerial appointment, biographies of key ministerial actors and through interviews with elite actors. Pilot empirical research has begun, incorporating the following states: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Spain, Sweden, and the UK. These states share the common status as parliamentary democracies but differ in terms of their traditions and sources of ministerial recruitment as well as regional configurations.

Overall, our research agenda will make a strong theoretical and empirical contribution to comparative scholarship on the executive branch, both from a mainstream and a gendered perspective.

References


