Women’s Power and Empowerment within Political Parties

Maria de la Fuente
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain)
mdelafuentevazquez@gmail.com

&

Tània Verge
Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona, Spain)
tania.verge@upf.edu

This paper seeks to assess gender power relations in political parties, which might (dis)empower both individual women seeking to become active participants as well as women as a group. Parties have historically been male-dominated structures with gender-biased organizational principles, rules, practices, and inertias. In this context, we explore how these factors shape power over (domination), power to (resistance), and power with (solidarity). Our focus shifts from the formal level towards a more complex concept of power dynamics within parties, showing differentiated and conflicting patterns of formal and real power. We do so by analyzing focus groups composed of women party activists from five Spanish political parties. Overall, the logic of distribution fails to fully account for the foundations of gender power relations, and changes in the principles of office distribution (such as quotas) have been clearly insufficient to challenge men’s power and women’s subordination. Despite women’s increasing resistance and collective action, as institutionalized domination remains basically unchallenged, men’s capacity (power over) to constrict women’s power (to and with) still prevails.

Paper presented at the panel ‘Gender and Power’, RC36 on Political Power, XXII\textsuperscript{nd} IPSA Congress, Madrid, 8-12 July 2012
Introduction

Research on women’s descriptive representation has increasingly emphasized the need to examine political parties as they are the gatekeepers of elective office. The seminal work by Lovenduski and Norris (1993) systematized the different factors embedded in the candidate recruitment process using the now well-established “supply and demand” model in which supply-side factors are inherent to candidates’ individual characteristics (resources, motivations, etc.) and demand-side factors relate do the willingness of party selectorates to select female candidates. Despite its extensive application, as Kenny (2011: 22) argues, this model lacks critical engagement with the underlying gender norms and relations that structure the institutions of political recruitment. Yet, those studies that do explore these gender dynamics in candidate selection usually fail to thoroughly examine the broader organizational setting of political parties which constrains women’s agency. While women’s representation in national legislatures might be conceived of as “the most symbolic indicator of political equality” (Lovenduski and Norris 1993: 310), the latter deals with much more than patterns of candidate recruitment. For one thing, the decision to run for office is linked to an individual’s previous decision, that to participate in a political party as well as to comfort with her participation –especially in strong parliamentary democracies where party careers rank high in the selection of would-be candidates. Thus, unacknowledged gender(ed) norms, organizational practices and relations need to be studied in the daily functioning of parties, paying greater attention to the structural causes of inequality which might, eventually, bias the whole selection process.

Political parties undoubtedly meet Acker’s characteristics for a “gendered organization”, namely “that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (1990: 146; see also Acker 1992). Overall, men (along with a traditional masculinity) dominate parties’ personnel, procedures and policies, and several biases discriminate against women and femininity, leading some authors to depict political parties as “institutionally sexist” organizations (Lovenduski 2005: 53-56). Therefore, it is precisely intra-party institutionalized gender power relations which call for a thoughtful examination.

Following the burgeoning literature on feminist institutionalism, in this paper we investigate power within political parties considering gender as a central dimension to understanding basic power institutional dynamics. The integration of gender in the analysis requires paying attention to both formal and informal party rules and practices, historical legacies, structure and agency, as well as organizational shifts (see Krook and Mackay 2011). Our analysis moves beyond the common perspective in the field of women’s descriptive representation, which implicitly tends to equate presence to power. Political representation is a necessary but insufficient condition to empower women. Besides, the distributive logic of power fails to acknowledge the relational and dynamic nature of power in political institutions (Allen 1999; Young 1990). As empirical evidence shows, while women’s increased representation has been considered to empower women by means of constituting a “critical mass”, there is no straightforward relationship (see Dahlerup 1988). Even when equality measures such as gender quotas are adopted, partisan strategic maneuvers
hinder their effective implementation (Bird 2003; Murray 2010; Verge and Troupel 2011).

In seeking to identify the mechanisms underlying gender power relations in political parties we adopt Allen’s (1998: 33) three-sided feminist account of power, namely power as domination—the “particular kinds of power that men are able to exercise over women”—, power as empowerment—the “power women have to act”—, and power as solidarity—“the power that women exercise with each other”. This enables us to unpack the complex and dynamic gendered interactions which sustain male dominance and disempower women both individually and, more dramatically, as a group. This is also useful to explore whether and how women are able to resist male dominance and establish solidarity among them and build coalitions with other groups.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The first section elaborates on the theoretical framework. The second section presents the data and methods used in the empirical analysis. The third section examines how the different dimensions of power operate in the daily functioning of political parties. The last section reflects on the main findings and suggests avenues for further research.

A framework for the analysis of intra-party gender power relations

Feminist scholars have long emphasized that power lies at the core of the “gender order” (Connell 2002). Indeed, power is articulated through gender (Scott 1989: 45). The incongruity of the fact that the progress made by women in political parties and public institutions has been very impressive in the last decades while their own organizations have not been sufficiently transformed to eliminate gender norms, practices, ideologies and images calls for a systematic scrutiny of the gender power relations that shape unequally the opportunities for agency of men and women. Our framework for the analysis of intra-party gender power relations builds on feminist critical theory as well as on feminist institutionalism, a combination we believe has many advantages for the premises and normative implications of our research. Both frameworks are critical with methodological individualism since social analyses conceived of as a collection of personal choices that can not be normatively evaluated obscure structural subordinations such as those derived from gender (Walby 1990). Indeed, political institutions are not mutually beneficial for all groups as they involve the exercise of power and usually one group is more able than the other(s) to impose its will (Moe 2005). Additionally, both frameworks consider women as a “structural social group” as their “similar position in interactive and institutional relations condition their opportunities and life prospects” (Young 2000: 97; see also Kenny 2007: 96). At the same time, gender is conceptualized as a “continuous, variable, and tenacious process that, while usually leading to women’s disadvantage, is challenged, negotiated, subverted, and resisted” (Kenney 1996: 445).

The synthesis of feminist political science and new institutionalism (the so-called feminist institutionalism) allows us examining how institutional configurations, in our case the party organization, affect gender power relations (see Krook and Mackay 2011). Gendering institutionalism places at the core of the research the differential effect institutions have on men and women, the
gender-biased access to resources and social recognition which creates power, the mechanisms that sustain its reproduction and the implications for actors’ choices and strategies. It also puts a central emphasis on how institutions can be changed and which legacies and ongoing dynamics reform efforts must contend with (Kenny and Mackay 2009: 276-7; Mackay, Kenny and Chappell 2010: 581-3; Waylen 2009: 245). Last, besides examining “institutions qua institutions” feminist institutionalism also “provides an additional tool for studying the engagement of gender equality activists” (Chappell 2006: 223).

Political parties are not gender-neutral structures and, as many other institutions, establish definitions of femininity and masculinity, arrange gender hierarchies, and define gender-appropriate jobs (Lovenduski 2005). The “logic of appropriateness” underpinning political institutions (i.e., prescribed behaviors, norms, and beliefs) is overly gendered (Chappell 2006). A fully developed gender power analysis needs to account for the fact that formal power does not automatically lead to real power. It must then examine both formal rules as well as informal practices, routines, conventions and norms which privilege certain groups over others (Kenny 2007: 95; Krook 2006: 3).

In contrast to previous research on the field of women’s descriptive representation which mainly concentrates on the gendered allocation of party and institutional offices, we claim that in order to critically examine gender power relations within parties it is crucial to move beyond the distributive logic of power. As Young (1990) and Allen (1999) note, the logic of distribution might help us understand formal power but fails to grasp the complexities of real power dynamics. On the one hand, reducing the issue of power to the gendered distribution of political positions underplays the complexity of the subordination and empowerment dynamics which take place within institutions. Indeed, these dynamics can simultaneously subordinate or empower individuals with equivalent formal positions. On the other hand, subordinating and empowering dynamics do not operate as material zero-sum goods which can be easily transferred from one group to another one. Understanding oppression and domination as social processes, it follows that gender power relations are “not simply a case of the unjust distribution of opportunities, rights, resources or recognition, but also a case of the institutionalized processes in which some people are not able to exercise and develop their capabilities, express their own opinion and experience and participate in defining conditions for actions” (Uhde 2010: 153). That is to say, we are fundamentally interested in examining the institutional (party) context in which specific patterns of distribution are realized rather than in distribution per se.

As said, we apply a feminist account of power with a view to unfolding the “gender regime” that permeates party organizations thereby disempowering women and preventing political equality from being truly effective. The concept of power as both oppression and capacity to act has been long been embraced by feminist theorists (Hartsock, 1982) and based, among others, on Arendt’s (1970) and Pitkin’s (1972) work on power to. Without analyzing domination we miss out how subordination is played out through gender, and without taking resistance into account we limit the identification of potential ways of social transformation (Allen 2008: 8). Rather than taking the assumption that institutions are oppressive to women at face value, this allows us to problematize this notion both theoretically and empirically.
Our analysis of gender power relations within parties adopts Allen’s triadic conception of power (Allen 1999), namely power over, power to and power with. The first dimension of power, “power over”, is concerned with the ways women may be subordinated. In the context of party organizations, we will look at how men and masculinized party structures, practices and norms have “the ability to constrain the choices” available to women “in a nontrivial way” that works to women’s disadvantage, be it intentionally or “in routine or unconsidered ways” (Allen 1998: 33). The second dimension of power is “power to” which describes “the capacity of an agent to act in spite of or in response to the power wielded over her by others” (p.34). In this case, we will focus on how party women might resist male dominance and thus be empowered individually to subvert domination. Finally, power has a collective dimension, “power with”, which corresponds to the building of coalitions and the forging of solidarity links with others (p.35). This last sense of power requires examining whether women have the “ability to act together for the attainment of a common or shared end or series of ends” (p.35), that is, how party women seek to transform their organizations with a view to overturning gender biases and instilling more egalitarian ways of functioning. We will mainly focus on sisterhood among party women and alliances with other groups.

Before moving to the empirical analysis a few caveats are in order here. First, the distinction of constraining (over) and enabling (to and with) conceptions of power enable to “break out the dualism between being powerless and being powerful, which is thought to be unhelpfully combative and hierarchical” (Squires 1999: 39). This implies a non essentialist and dynamic concept of power which can account for both stability and change and prevents the oversimplification of women as passive victims with no agency capacity. Second, we do not claim that power over is exclusively male and power to is inherently female neither that power over is essentially non democratic, thus rejecting the problematic adversarial binary opposition (Squires 1999: 42-5). Third, power over is to be understood not only as the relation among individuals with an expressed and observable conflict, but also as the ways institutions shape the individual expression of political demands and settle the political agenda in favor of privileged social groups (Lukes 1974). These perspectives help us to avoid the gender-blindness of methodological individualism as well as the essentialist bias of an oversimplified structural approach.

Data and methods

The empirical analysis focuses on Spanish political parties, particularly on the main parties found in the region of Catalonia. While at the national level party competition is characterized by bipartism, in this region multiparty competition prevails which allows us to examine gender power relations in a wider sample. We center on the five largest political parties that have traditionally attained a significant representation in national, regional and local institutions. Our sample includes both the regional branches of the two largest national parties as well as regionalist parties. The first group includes the social democrats and the conservatives, the Party of the Catalans Socialists/Partit dels Socialistes de
Catalunya\(^1\) (PSC) and the Popular Party/Partido Popular (PP), respectively. As regards regionalist parties, we examine Democratic Convergence of Catalonia/Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya (CDC), which has a liberal orientation; Republican Left of Catalonia/Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), a left-wing party which advocates for the secession of Catalonia from Spain; and Initiative for Catalonia Greens/Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds (ICV)\(^2\), a post-communist party which stands for ecosocialism. Beyond ideological differences, the units of analysis also vary in party size, the PSC and CDC being the largest ones, both in vote share and membership size, followed successively by the PP, ERC and ICV.

The empirical data used in this paper comes from several sources: party rules dealing with equality; face-to-face interviews with the leaders of the women’s section of the parties under examination; and five focus groups with female party activists.\(^3\) Party rules help us identify the formal situation while the other sources provide us fruitful insights on the real situation. Interviews preceded the focus groups for two main reasons. First, we sought to obtain background information and gain access to party regulations. And, second, we asked the leaders of the women’s sections to act as facilitators for the organization of the focus groups.

A non intentional sampling was applied and the call to participants was assumed by the women’s section (or equivalent organ) of each of the five parties following certain requested criteria such as variation in the participants’ sociodemographic characteristics (mainly age and caring responsibilities – having children under age or not) as well as town size. Although representativeness sits at odds with focus group methodology, an excessive homogeneity of participants would have also been counterproductive for our research aims. Focus groups participants were predominantly middle-level cadres, either party or elected officials – mainly based at the local level.

For both practical and ethical reasons, the participants of each focus group belonged to the same party to grant they could feel more comfortable to talk and the discussion was more productive. We posited the same general questions to all groups. Although we did not explicitly ask in any form about power or how women might be dominated, resist and subvert domination or forge solidaristic networks a variety of interpretations and experiences dealing with power clearly appeared.\(^4\) We proceeded to analyze inductively the content of the five focus groups by coding segments of data related to gender power

---

\(^1\) Strictly speaking, the PSC is not a regional branch but a federated party, though in practical terms it operates as such: it integrates in the PSOE’s bench in the lower house and unity of vote prevails. Nonetheless, PSC decisions over party rules and candidate selection do not need the PSOE’s approval.

\(^2\) Although CDC and ICV coalesce in elections with other parties, we will not examine their coalition partners here. CDC and ICV are the senior partners of their respective coalitions.

\(^3\) Focus groups took place at different moments along 2011 as the regional and local elections held that year forced us to adjust to parties’ tempos. The average number of participants per focus group was 10.

\(^4\) Both interviewees and focus groups participants received a coversheet introducing the researchers and the research project so that they could make an informed decision to participate. The guarantee of lack of personal identification was essential in building trust and rapport. Discussions were videotaped with participants’ explicit consent to ensure an accurate transcription.
relations. Finally, the emerging analysis suggested moving to extant theoretical codes, namely the three dimensions of power presented above.

**Gender and power in political parties**

As previously highlighted, the empirical analysis is structured around Allen’s (1999) triadic conception of power and builds upon the tools and concepts drawn from feminist institutionalism. The quotations we use in the text are illustrative of the interpretations and experiences reported by focus group participants on gender power relations and do not stand in any case for official party positions. The translation of quotations from their original language (Catalan and Spanish) to English has sought to respect both the maximum literality and the linguistic tone employed by participants. Respecting our guarantee of confidentiality, quotations have been anonimized.

**Power over**

In the following pages we review the factors raised in focus group discussions which make for a gendered organization from the perspective of “power over”, that is how the institutional setting –that is, the party organization– and the in-group –men– constrain the choices’ available to women in a nontrivial way.5

Traditional masculinity hegemony in the definition of merits and leadership skills. In political parties, although merits and leadership skills present seemingly gender-neutral definitions, focus group participants highlighted men are considered the norm group: “If you don’t show the ‘valuable’ skills, your leadership is not recognized at all”. Institutional biases embody –implicitly and explicitly– beliefs about the “male experience” regarding instrumentality, competitiveness, and certain forms of rationality as the norm, which naturalize or routinize the relationship between masculinity and power thereby blurring it: “There’s an excessive need of the masculine forms. Men peers suggest you: ‘If you don’t give orders by thumping the table with your fist, you don’t show you’re in command’.

Simultaneously, women face trouble when negotiating a feminine way or deploying alternative leadership skills as if femininity and credibility were very often incompatible and characterized as “weak, fragile and vulnerable”. This is conceived of as “a mechanism to show who holds the power”. Those men who do not make up to the traditional masculinity in their performance are also discredited as “bambis” (like the Disney character), and “even when some men are depicted as ‘good guys’ this means they’re considered to be weak”. Stereotyping reinforces gender hierarchies and yields two main consequences. On the one hand, women who access certain positions are likely to have adopted (or to have been forced to adopt) the masculine traits (“men prioritize sexist women, they don’t choose feminist women”). On the other hand, this

5 The characterization of power over we present here is also found in parties’ collateral youth organizations, as highlighted by the youngest focus group participants who currently were (or have recently been) members of the parties’ youth caucuses.
significantly affects women’s self-esteem on their capacities. “Fear”, “insecurity” and the “impression of being out of place” are frequently suggested as constraints to women’s agency. Most women refrain from more active participation (for example in party organs) out of fear of not being able to express themselves properly (according to the prevailing male standards).

Informal networks and boys’ clubs. The fact that men rely more on their peers reveals, according to the discussions held by focus group participants, an unequal allocation of power within party organizations expressed through the asymmetrical density of informal networks among women and men. As several authors have noted, in any domain of public life where power lays, informal networks of male peers who provide each other with information and contacts for career progression preserve male dominance at the top (Bochel and Bochel 2000). When a man looks for female candidates, either for party or elective positions, he happens to “find” very few women because he tends to recruit candidates from his inner circle of confidence, who are basically in-group (male) candidates (Verge 2010). Given the predominance of men in executive boards, this gender bias negatively affects the nomination of candidates from the out-group (women) (Nieven 1998: 75).

Yet, informal networks are pervasive in the daily functioning of political parties and go well beyond candidate selection processes. Informal networking is the paramount characteristic of the traditional masculine way of doing politics. As one focus group participant highlighted: “When we argue that party structures are very masculine, we mean that decision-making very frequently takes place outside the formal channels (in bars, restaurants…)”. In addition, “even if women share the table with men, many topics never arise, and if they do, women are not included at all in the conversation”. The time these activities (“the beer decisions”) usually take place (late evenings, after the formal meetings have been held) is considered to be entrenched in male power and, as such, this dynamic presents a strong resistance to change. Therefore, formal power and real power are dramatically disconnected.

Vertical and horizontal segregation of responsibilities. As we know, the sphere of political representation is not immune to the sex segregation of responsibilities (see, among many others, Bird 2003; Valiente, Ramiro and Morales 2005). In fact, the application of gender appropriateness criteria starts in the allocation of party positions. All Spanish political parties present a similar structure: at each territorial level (local, supra-local, regional and/or national) an executive committee runs party activity by assigning areas of responsibility to a reduced group of people. As one participant put it, “some positions are de facto for men and others for women; it is like the allocation of the kitchen and the sofa”. Both the highest positions (vertical segregation) and the portfolios traditionally considered of higher importance (horizontal segregation) tend to be predominantly fielded with men.

---

6 In some parties the executive committee is voted by the delegates of the party conference while in others its composition is solely decided by the party leader.
The empirical analysis confirms that within parties, as in other domains of social life, the gender division of labor may be conducive to marginalization and powerlessness. Although the discussions held in the five focus groups relativized the traditional importance attached to the different responsibilities, as this falls under the masculine normativity, its practical implications on real power clearly rose. First, the gendered distribution of party positions entails an asymmetric disposition of resources to develop the tasks, such as financial resources, support of the party structure, or office accumulation. Second, “masculine” portfolios (such as organization or finances) have more visibility and can be the springboard to other relevant positions. “Feminine” portfolios (such as welfare policies or social movements) are less likely to have these qualities, especially the one devoted to gender equality, as participants noted. Third, the actions developed under the “feminine” portfolios usually receive scarce attention in the meetings of the executive committee leaving women with the feeling that their responsibilities are basically redundant or non important. Fourth, women often perform subordinate roles, such as organizing the meetings, taking the minutes, and monitoring the implementation of decisions in-between meetings: “They [men] want us to get the work ahead. Press notes, telephone calls...we do count for this, but it is difficult to be part of more relevant decisions”. All these factors are identified as mechanisms that make women “feel tired and bored” and contribute to them resigning at higher rates than men.

Sexist organizational practices. Although all the factors mentioned above can be seen as gendered-organizational dynamics, we can also identify specific sexist practices which overly reflect men’s hostility towards women seeking power. First, women’s contributions in party organs are often glossed over and are not recognized as valuable contributions by their male peers, which undermine women’s capacity as political agents. Second, women’s performance is generally evaluated through more critical lenses. These two quotations are very illustrative: “A man hesitates and he’s thought to be thinking; a woman hesitates and she’s a bluff”; or “When two men have a bitter argument, no doubt the topic deserves hot discussion; when two women do so, they’re considered as two hysterics killing each other”. The scrutiny of women’s capacity is perceived to be tougher after the adoption of gender quotas. Many women have been qualified as tokens while men’s competency lacks any scrutiny. Third, those women perceived as being ambitious are frequently sanctioned, whereas ambition is presumed to be a positive characteristic when found in men. Finally, the most frequent sanction is removal from high-ranked offices or “a subtle weakening of her competences”, which leads to women’s higher turnover and/or rotation in political responsibilities than men. Whereas one participant noted that: “In my town, two men competed to head the party list: Eventually, one became the head of the list and the other occupied the second position”, another participant stated: “I competed to head the party list and I lost. I was displaced to an unwinnable position”. Overall, the empirical analysis unfolds a significant hostility towards women seeking power. As affirmed by one participant: “They [men] think we’re usurping the power they’ve long held, and that [sharing power with women] is an imposition [via gender quotas], it is not a voluntary act”.
Power to

Let us now turn to how party women might undertake certain actions to resist male dominance and thus seek individual empowerment to subvert domination. Daily party interactions allow us to evaluate the exercise and effectiveness of “power to” and to assess whether it is counteracted by predominant gendered practices and discourses.

Respect for party rules. Party women aim at reinforcing the party decision-making organs in order to equate formal power with real power. Rising up the value of these arenas is carried out through different actions. On the one hand, women refuse to follow traditionally male ritual behaviors and practices which undermine the quality of democratic deliberation, such as: participating regardless of not having a substantive point to make; repeating others’ previous interventions; referencing a previous intervention of a male participant as a means to add legitimacy to one’s point—even if the author of the point was a woman and it was initially discarded. Focus group participants emphasized these rituals do not adjust to the real objectives of the meetings and are mainly aimed at showing power off as “men are in need of external recognition”. These “organizational liturgies” were also perceived by focus group participants as time mismanagement (“a complete loss of time”), which strongly demotivates women since their time availability is constrained by the fact they still assume the lion’s share of housework and caring responsibilities.

The participation in informal networks also tends to be rejected in terms of both respect for formal arenas and time constraints (“to build these networks you need to have time”). It should be noted though, as focus group participants emphasized, that in the few occasions women participate in these networks they are not their promoters. There is also a pragmatic reason: Women seek to avoid political activities totally absorbing their free time. Participating in parties is aimed at advancing policy goals. Having dinner out is not an activity women want to associate to political participation, that is regarded as a leisure activity to be enjoyed with one’s partner, friends, family, etc.

Recognition of other women. Hitherto, women’s presence in party decision-making organs has increased, therefore focus group participants acknowledge the efforts made by the women who have reached the top and who symbolically act as role models for women party members. For example, one group discussed how empowering it was to have seen a young women party spokesperson overcome her fears and insecurities to speak in public, which has made other young female party activists feel they can also do it. Another group highlighted the change brought about by having a women party leader who is a single mother: “If you need to leave a meeting because your child is ill, she knows what you are talking about”. Without establishing essentialist categories, focus group participants seem to suggest that women who have achieved a high-ranked formal position act as symbols which enlarge the array of accepted political practices and repertoires, politicize unacknowledged norms and practices and challenge the prevailing “logic of appropriateness”. This symbolic expansion is a basic requisite for women’s political inclusion and acts against
marginalization. Yet, as women suffer a higher turnover and rotation the role models’ tenure is brief, so their recast of the gendered nature of the political is short-lived.

Alternatively, gynocentric leadership discourses are sometimes deployed as a reaction to androcentrism stressing women’s ability to make a valuable contribution by drawing upon different inherent leadership skills. Yet, this strategy does not challenge the gender role division, it is not transformative; it only reverses the normative value of masculine and feminine roles. So, challenging the (male) norm does not provide an effective way to resist in a hostile institutional environment provided that “femininity” is strongly vulnerable to stigmatization.

**Alternative political engagement.** In the various focus groups women defined their political engagement as a communitarian duty and/or as an enriching personal experience to be assumed for a limited time. This conception of doing politics does not match the “exclusivity and dedication norm” that prevails in political parties which often leads to frustration out of the need to choose between personal and political life, a choice perceived to be not only painful but also totally absurd, since both are forms of commitment to the others: “Why do we have to choose between our political life and motherhood?”. Underlying this painful choice we find the “feeling of guilt”, an experience totally unprecedented for male subjects, which is reinforced by a frequent lack of understanding by women’s families.

This alternative not saturating approach to political engagement is considered to contain fruitful possibilities regarding the quality of politics. On the one hand, women seek to include the daily life logic in their political activities which might be transformative to the extent that it transforms the agenda and the ways of doing politics as usual by including both “normal” women’s and men’s experiences and the private sphere in the political life. As one participant noted, “women separate their associational activities from their personal life, whereas men’s perception of leadership and power is continuous across time and space”. On the other hand, women tend to keep “the exit door at hand”, that is, they are ready to resign if they do not feel comfortable with their participation or if the latter conflicts too much with their personal life. While this may partially explain women’s high turnover and men’s perpetuation in office (“women are more nomadic and men more sedentary”), focus group participants believed that a higher renovation of both party and elected officers would help enhance democratic quality in parties. As one participant expressed: “The problem is not that women leave at higher rates but that men don’t have this door opened”.

Finally, as already pointed, time deficit is recurrently emphasized by focus group participants as one of the major constrains for women’s political participation. Actually, time is seen as key to understand gender power relations within parties. Supply-side factors (women’s role as care providers) might explain women’s time scarcity but demand-side factors in the form of requisites of 24/7 availability, deficient planning of meetings and late-hour meetings are regarded as a means to subordinate women. Women’s resistance to these well entrenched organizational practices is time efficiency. As illustrated by this quotation: “I don’t need to take my colleague to a restaurant and have a three-course lunch and a bottle of wine; we just meet and decide. We [women] take
into account time utility and when we have decision-making power we don’t have the need to do all the ‘show’”. This might be an empowering act since: (a) it questions the prevailing conception of politics as saturating all other aspects of personal life; and, (b) it unmasks the ritualization of predominant male practices, thereby clearly exposing power relations. Nonetheless, time efficiency will only be a truly empowering mechanism when mainstreamed in the organizational culture displacing traditional practices which only suit the hegemonic male roles in both the public and private spheres.

**Power with**

Within political parties, women’s “power with” can be seen as “critical acts of empowerment”, that is, as the willingness and ability to mobilize the resources of the organization to improve women’s situation as a group (Dahlerup 1988: 296). The empirical analysis identified several solidaristic and coalition-building critical acts.

Women organize to change party rules. Party feminists have pursued changes in the rules of the game and sought to transform parties into more women-friendly entities. In other words, they have engaged in a collective critique of the institutional structures which reproduce gender injustice. They have been clearly more successful in devising policies to increase women’s representation than to transform the operation of parties. Regarding the former, before the introduction of a statutory quota in 2007\(^7\), the three left-wing parties (PSC, ERC, and ICV) under examination had already adopted voluntary quotas for both party and institutional offices in the last decades and gradually transformed the initial provisions for women’s representation into a gender-neutral formulation of parity. The centre-right CDC has only assumed soft targets and the right-wing PP a vague recommendation (see Verge 2012). For CDC focus group participants, despite their party had only assumed an informal target for women’s representation before the approval of the state-wide statutory quota, it is clear that “without quotas women would be absent”. PP women tend to embrace the party’s official position against quotas but the practical experiences exposed by participants show women’s discomfort with gendered practices in candidate selection and a more favorable position towards quotas as a means to prevent these practices from occurring.

Nonetheless, gender quotas do not seem to fully work as empowerment mechanisms. Focus group participants pinpointed several distortions between the formal guarantees and access to real power. As found in other case studies on quota implementation, men still tend to occupy in a larger proportion top positions and winning seats. In local elections, it is reported by a group that some women accepted to integrate the electoral list only to resign afterwards and cede their elected position to a man. Besides, affirmative action is often used to make to criteria coincide: women then fulfill a double quota, that of gender and youth, which provides parties with “an image of freshness and even beauty”. While diversity is formally assured, it minimizes the challenge on the in-

---

\(^7\) It requires parties to incorporate a minimum of 40 percent and a maximum of 60 percent of each sex into their lists of candidates.
group’s power as men remain in their positions. Finally, “when a party’s power [expected winnable seats] shrinks, so does the commitment with the effective implementation of quotas”. Thus, women’s increased representation does not lead per se to their collective empowerment, even if it is a necessary condition.

Alternatively, those measures designed to transform how parties operate are far from producing the desired effects. Left-wing parties developed during the 2000s internal equality plans in order to identify the organizational dynamics which constrain women’s participation, and defined several measures to change the daily operation of parties, including the style of doing politics. The leaders of the women’s sections complained that, although plans have risen to some extent awareness on gender inequalities, the actions remain highly underdeveloped in some key areas. Parties have advanced the most in visualizing women and monitoring women’s representation across party levels and institutions but the way of doing politics as usual clearly prevails. Ultimately, time efficiency and late hours in the organization of party activities is the cornerstone of the untouchable domains: “Making men think of time in a different way would erode their power; precisely, they use late hours to keep power”.

Women work to recruit other women. Women selectors tend to intensify women’s presence by letting the ladder down to other women. Nonetheless, personal interviews with the different parties’ women’s section leaders do not permit us to conclude that this cross-party practice is due to a gender consciousness developed by women when they become the selectors. The interviewees rather confirmed the “old boy network” thesis we discussed above: When a man looks for female candidates, he does not “find” that many because he tends to recruit candidates from his inner circle of confidence, who are basically in-group (male) candidates. Conversely, when a woman is the selector, she already knows a group of women with whom she shares party activities and personal networks, so the lists are more balanced (see Verge 2010).

However, in general, focus group participants agreed on pointing that supply-side factors such as gender socialization on the perception of men’s and women’s skills as well as demand-side factors such as the organizational sexist practices we have discussed limit women’s will to accept party or elective positions. “I’m not prepared enough”, “I won’t be able to” are common answers among women whereas men tend to rapidly accept the offer without questioning their abilities, thereby reproducing the relationship between masculinity and power.

Women seek to build coalitions of support. In the parties where quotas have been introduced women’s sections sought the support of the party’s male leaders in order to overcome the resistance to affirmative action, especially by middle-level cadres. They also lobbied the party leadership to obtain a seat in the highest party organ for the women’s section. More generally, party women have sought to establish a women’s section where equality issues can be discussed and actions planned. This strategy or critical act presents different expressions according to party ideology. Left-wing parties have traditionally
reserved these caucuses for women’s participation and thus excluded men. Liberal and conservative parties present a different approach. CDC has a common sectoral branch for all discriminated groups (women, disabled, gays…) wherein participation is open to both men and women. The PP also has a sort of catch-all sectoral branch opened to members’ punctual participation for the drafting of electoral manifestoes. These do not equate, though, to intersectional coalitions and they might well contribute to diffuse women’s interests and to weaken women’s demands. Women sections in left-wing parties frequently seek to build coalitions of support outside the party organization in order to advance common goals and lobby for equality policies, especially with the women’s movement, while women’s party or public officers at the local level do so with communitarian-action oriented groups.

Although the existing collective arenas for women’s participation in left-wing parties seem to be to some extent conducive to empowerment, both the interviewees and focus-group participants highlighted that women’s collective action within parties is quite deficient. The explanation provided is threefold. On the one hand, women’s collective action and lobbying faces strong hostility by men and by some women too, particularly in liberal or conservative parties but also in left-wing parties. Women’s collective action is frequently considered as “a pain in the neck” and totally unnecessary after the adoption of quotas. Left-wing focus group participants pinpointed men’s lack of truly commitment with equality and “self-indulgency with gender quotas which seem to preclude any further action”. Conversely, men’s complicity is never put into question and, most importantly, not even identified as political. On the other hand, despite increases in women’s presence as both members and officers exposes conflict and triggers demands that favor the construction of a gender conscience, female membership remains largely unaware of institutionalized gender discrimination and feminist discourses are seen with suspicion. In the case of conservative women gender consciousness is the weakest of all as they argue their party does not treat individuals differently according to their sex and, indeed, women just want to be evaluated as professional individuals carrying out their responsibilities as any other male peer. For example, in their evaluation of the gender segregation of responsibilities or the gender bias in assessing merits, most participants agreed with the fact that “if you behave like a ‘candy women’ you don’t get respect from men” and “if you provide a strong reaction when treated as a token you are not marginalized”. So, they seem to emphasize that it is all about women’s “personal attitude”; to put it differently, women can fight back to prevent discrimination on an individual basis. Nonetheless, from a gender power analysis, while conservative women might consider this strategy as individually empowering, we contest its effectiveness as gender power interactions within the party organization go unnoticed and, as such, they are not only unchallenged but reproduced.

Concluding remarks

By bridging feminist political theory and empirical research on gender politics this paper has aimed at contributing to unfold the consequences of partisan gendered dynamics for women’s power and empowerment within parties. Allen’s theoretical framework help us disentangle women’s domination,
resistance and solidarity while feminist institutionalism allows us to identify how power operates in the daily functioning of party organizations. Although the substantive content of the empirical analysis is grounded on the composition of the focus groups, the large similarities among most of the experiences and interpretations provided by participants show that parties are inhospitable spaces for women that dramatically discriminate against them.

The dissociation between formal and real power is key in gender power relations within parties. While formal power follows a distributive pattern and can be thus analyzed by means of counting representatives and identifying key factors in access to political office, real power shows much higher complexity. It involves structural, institutional and relational factors, and presents a strong pervasiveness in the party organization. Significantly, we have found that whereas it is easier for men to find a straight correspondence between formal and real power, women struggle to have their formal power matched with real power.

While formal power can be altered through measures such as gender quotas, changing how real power operates is contingent upon deep institutional reforms which face a strong resistance. Men and women have more or less access to party resources (even when holding similar formal power) and enjoy longer or shorter political careers (irrespective of an individual’s merits) according to their adaptation to traditional gender roles and to the intersection of various axis of subordination. Indeed, not all men are equally included among the privileged and not all women are equally excluded. Identifying the particular group of people who controls the lion’s share of party resources (be it financial or administrative support, office accumulation, personal recognition, time uses, etc.) enables us to trace non-essentialist power patterns, which operate on gender and intersectional bases. Also, it enables us to link institutional power dynamics to the issue of political and ethical responsibility, at the individual and collective levels, of those who hold power positions.

Discriminatory factors are quite similarly identified across focus groups though party ideology turns out to be a crucial factor for the interpretation of some gender power relations and of the (dis)empowering effects for women – right-wing women perceiving lower discrimination based on gender. Notwithstanding, there is a broad consensus on the inhospitable traditions for non standard masculinities in political parties. Power over is mainly deployed through institutionalized gender biases in the definition of merits and leadership skills, vertical and horizontal sex segregation of political responsibilities, a broad array of sexist organizational dynamics, and through informal networking and the establishment of “boy’s clubs”. As noted by focus group participants, the “rules of the game” are different for men and women, that is, "even if women have many aces, the ‘game’ is being played with different cards". Although we acknowledge various critical acts party women are performing individually (power to) and as a group (power with), we can not conclude these are effective enough or sufficient to subvert male domination. Respect for party rules, an alternative political engagement, and time efficiency have the potential to be highly beneficial to improve the quality of both deliberation and functioning of political parties, though these acts shall only be effective when adopted by dominant and non dominant groups.

Overall, men are very reluctant to making significant changes into the gender regime prevailing in political parties. This does not imply malevolent
collusion among men to keep women out of power but rather the enjoyment of their structural advantage which allows them to keep their privileged position while constricting women’s power to and power with. Office distribution, predominantly through gender quotas, is insufficient to erode or eliminate the main organizational sources of male power. Alternatively, when women organize to overturn the institutionalized domination they meet strong hostility, particularly when it is the core “rules of the game” (including the informal and internalized ones) which are challenged. As change and continuity coexist, quota reforms are hardly critical junctures per se but rather layering processes in which some elements are renegotiated while others remain.

This paper calls gender politics scholars to look beyond candidate recruitment, quota reforms, and women’s political presence. Given that parties matter, further research is needed at least in two main avenues for which feminist institutionalism is extremely well equipped: One, to unveil how the gendered power configuration of political parties prevents political equality from being truly effective through a variety of naturalized and institutionalized legacies and dynamics which shape the form and context of women’s subordination or the way they benefit men’s interests more generally. And, second, to make resistance visible by carefully examining those critical acts that empower women at the party level and by identifying where and when feminist activism can find the most advantageous settings to pursue its claims, including how critical acts might change across space –i.e. different political parties– as well as across women’s groups –i.e. race and age. Parties, as any other institution, might well be path-dependent but they are still subject to change through political conflict. All in all, the “inner lives” of political parties require further attention to grasp women’s power and (dis)empowerment and to revalue women’s agency.
Acknowledgements

This research has been funded by the Catalan Women’s Office (Institut Català de les Dones). The authors are grateful to Marta Corcoy and Silvia Claveria for their collaboration in carrying out the fieldwork.

References


