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Gender and the Executive Branch

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The executive branch of government constitutes the pinnacle of political power. In principle, presidents and prime ministers, along with their cabinets, set the policy agenda, debate, and deliberate policy initiatives; introduce legislation; and oversee the implementation of public policies.[1] Executives are the most visible political actors, representing the public "face" of government. Until very recently, executives were also the most masculinized of political institutions, with women absent entirely from the position of prime minister or president until the 1960s, and, at least until the last decade, holding only a small number of posts in cabinet. Yet one of the most striking global trends in recent years is the growing number of women elected to the post of prime minister or president: at the time of writing there are 12 countries where a woman occupies the top political office.[2] A growing number of women are also being appointed cabinet ministers and, in some cases, to some of the most traditionally masculine posts.[3] It is common today to define "parity" cabinets as those where women hold between 40% and 60% of ministerial portfolios. With that definition, countries as different as Spain, Bolivia,

1. Of course, this is not the case in the United States where Congress, rather than the president and cabinet, enjoys greater legislative powers.

2. These include Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Germany, Jamaica, Liberia, Malawi, Norway, and Trinidad and Tobago.

3. At the time of writing, women hold the defense portfolios in four European democracies: Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden.

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Sweden, and South Africa have had gender parity in cabinet. What is more, women's presence in cabinet is now a firmly established norm. Among the first questions raised by commentators after a newly elected president or prime minister announces her cabinet are, how many women were appointed? To which portfolios were they assigned?

Women's traditional absence from executive office has meant that the bulk of gender and politics scholarship has focused on women's recruitment to and roles within the legislative branch. Interest in women's presence in legislatures was motivated further by the adoption of candidate gender quotas in an ever-growing number of countries around the world beginning in the 1990s (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012; Krook 2009). More recently, though, gender and politics scholars have begun to turn their attention to women's presence, and the possible consequences of women's presence, in the executive branch. Existing studies have laid the important groundwork for accumulating knowledge on gender and executive office by asking when and why women are more likely to be recruited to cabinet positions (Bauer and Sawer 2011; Claveria 2014; Davis 1997; Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2005; Krook and O'Brien 2012) and to succeed in the pursuit of chief executive office (Jalalzai 2013; Murray 2010). This literature is exemplified by its comparative focus, with scholars seeking structural and political factors to explain cross-national variation in women's presence in executive office. The factors that have been found to matter the most include type of political system (presidential vs. parliamentary), cabinet type (generalist vs. specialist), and political factors like party ideology, electoral goals, and strategic incentives.

Despite the expanding literature on women and executive office, we still do not know much about the gendered dimensions of the executive branch. In particular, we lack case studies that dig more deeply into the day-to-day practices through which gendered hierarchies are reinforced. More specifically, for studies of ministerial office, two questions remain unexplored. The first concerns the informal dimensions of cabinet formation — that is, the unwritten yet highly regularized practices that limit and constrain the choices of presidents and prime ministers in putting together their cabinets. The second is the career trajectories of women appointed to cabinet posts. For example, how long do women stay in executive office and under which circumstances do they leave? There are also some gaps in our knowledge about women seeking chief executive office. The most comprehensive study of female presidents and prime ministers was conducted by Farida Jalalzai (2013), who finds that

women are more likely to be elected when the powers of the office are shared and weak, when the leader is removable, and in the wake of political crisis. Focusing more specifically on failed and successful campaigns of women competing for the top political job, Rainbow Murray's edited volume (2010) illustrates the range of gendered "double binds" that complicate women's pursuit of executive office. What is missing from these studies, however, is a closer, in-depth examination of how gender shapes pathways to executive office — that is, the opportunities, obstacles, and choices facing women that may lead them (or not) to pursue chief executive office. Most importantly, in parliamentary systems, becoming prime minister involves a prior, and very much gendered, hurdle of becoming party leader.

The papers in this special issue fill these gaps in the scholarship on cabinets and chief executives in a range of ways. Claire Annesley employs a feminist institutionalist approach to show that women's access to cabinet is enabled and constrained by layers of specific formal and informal rules that vary significantly even within a similar type of political system. Comparing the cases of two Westminster democracies, Australia and the United Kingdom, Annesley finds that gendered informal rules structure opportunities to access ministerial office, specifically in terms of who is eligible, how they qualify, and who selects ministers. These differ across the two most similar cases and, importantly, between parties within each country, with important consequences for women's presence. In a second paper, Susan Franceschet and Gwynn Thomas explore elite reactions to parity cabinets in Chile and Spain, finding that resistance to women's equal presence in Chile owes to the top-down origins of equality norms and the complexity of existing practices surrounding cabinet formation. Spanish prime ministers, in contrast, enjoy far greater autonomy in cabinet formation, and gender equality norms were already well established in the prime minister's party.

Annesley's analysis of cabinet formation in Australia and the United Kingdom, alongside Franceschet and Thomas's study of parity cabinets in Spain and Chile, shows the value of qualitative approaches to ministerial recruitment. The authors reveal the underlying (and largely informal) mechanisms that give rise to the gendered patterns of appointments that are found in cross-national quantitative studies. More important, large-N cross-national studies often focus on system-level factors, thereby missing the wide variation that may occur within countries. Even when party-level factors are tested, we know little beyond the impact of things like party ideology or the presence/absence of party

gender quotas. The papers by Annesley, and Franceschet and Thomas show the importance of *informal* rules.

Maria Escobar-Lemmon and Michelle Taylor-Robinson's article asks whether there are gendered dimensions to how ministers *leave* their posts. Notably, they find that a minister's sex does not appear to influence the duration of her term or the circumstances under which a minister leaves office. This finding gives cause for optimism — that is, if women overcome all of the hurdles in reaching the upper echelons of political office, their sex may not be an obstacle to remaining in office. Unfortunately, the findings of the study by Diana O'Brien et al. are less encouraging: cabinets headed by female prime ministers actually have fewer female ministers, particularly when compared to cabinets led by leftist male leaders. The authors speculate that — particularly for prime ministers, who are structurally more vulnerable to removable from office than are presidents — women in those offices face a different (gendered) set of incentives when it comes to selecting a cabinet.

Karen Beckwith examines the gendered routes to party leadership as the key prerequisite for becoming a prime minister in parliamentary democracies. By developing cases for Margaret Thatcher (UK) and Angela Merkel (Germany), Beckwith identifies both macropolitical and individual-level factors that shape the political opportunity structure and the strategic responses of men and women to potential opportunities posed by political crises. Crises remove from competition experienced male incumbents while also deterring less experienced junior men from standing. Thus, in times of political crisis, women's relative marginalization from politics becomes an advantage for experienced political women in seeking the position of party leader.

In sum, the papers assembled in this special issue shed light on the importance of the gender norms and hierarchies that structure women's access to the executive branch. Taken together these articles make a significant contribution to understanding the gendered composition and dynamics of the executive branch. These insights are of significance not only to gender and politics research; they set the agenda for executive branch scholarship more broadly.

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