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ROUTLEDGE

THE FUTURE OF

100
PERSPECTIVES

POLITICAL SCIENCE

Edited by GARY KING • KAY LEHMAN SCHLOZMAN • NORMAN H. NIE

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AT THE INTERSECTION OF INEQUALITIES

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Political equality is a fundamental tenet of democracy, and political scientists have long sought to understand the explanations for and consequences of its lack. Over the past four decades, important works in the American and Comparative subfields have contributed to our knowledge. We know, for instance, that inequalities in the political arena often stem from inequalities in the economic and social spheres. We know that inequalities seem to track membership in various types of identity-based groups. And we know that these inequalities on the whole appear to be persistent, rather than rotating; certain groups are nearly always advantaged and others disadvantaged.

What we do not yet know is how categories of identity intersect to produce more or less advantaged groups and group members. The prominence of inequalities at all levels of American life, and their implications for public participation, has been a running theme through recent American political science studies. Together, these works help to illuminate the necessary next step for our discipline: addressing the intersections of inequalities.

Contemporary feminist writings, particularly from women of color, speak to the power of intersectionality (see, e.g., works by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Harris, and the Combahee River Collective). Inequalities, when layered, are not additive but multiplicative. Therefore, studying such inequalities individually misses a large part of the story. As Mary Hawkesworth demonstrated in a 2003 APSR study, U.S. Congresswomen of color undergo distinctive marginalization based on a process of "racial-gendering" that is about neither race nor gender alone. Previous studies of women in legislatures missed this process, she explains, because the literature has not considered that political institutions themselves produce and reproduce raced/gendered experiences. Only by focusing her lens on the interaction between racing and gendering in the 1996 welfare reform

debates was Hawkesworth able to illuminate the particular forces operating to render invisible the Congresswomen of color, along with their work and policy priorities.

Such intersectionality is often prohibitively difficult to study. Each time we add in an axis of inequality (race, class, education, gender, religion, etc.), we divide our sample, reducing the amount of data available to draw conclusions. Employing interaction terms requires collecting yet more data; analyzing the intersection of all these types of inequalities would necessitate intensive data collection on groups notoriously difficult and expensive to study (the homeless, say, or small populations like disabled Latinas). Even after overcoming these hurdles, analysis of survey or roll-call vote data—and statistical methods more generally—can take us only so far. Dealing seriously with the complexities of intersecting identities necessarily triggers data difficulties like endogeneity, collinearity, and multiple causation. Despite sophisticated statistical methods, the standard goal of regression analysis (isolating the effects of individual variables) may not help (or indeed, may impede our ability) to fully understand the construction and functioning of hierarchies based on intersectionality. We must work to pair quantitative data with qualitative methods that help us frame and interpret results.

Such a question—how to study the intersections of inequalities—is part and parcel of a larger, perennial, social science question: how shall we study power? For we are, and should be, concerned with inequalities because of the power differential they imply. Power, however, is notoriously tricky to measure or even define. Power differentials create and sustain inequalities through complex mechanisms we have yet to understand. Then again, these mechanisms are themselves a product of inequalities. Endogeneity tends to rear its ugly head when we use statistical methods to study such cycles. Yet I venture to suggest that the production and reproduction of inequalities are indeed cyclical, and, worse, are based largely on the inequalities themselves. As feminist political scientists have taken pains to point out, gender deeply shapes our understanding of power. Political scientists of color convincingly argue the same about race/ethnicity. If the ways in which we think about power are already steeped in power, if the very language we use reinforces existing inequalities, then we shall have to be careful indeed in our concept definitions, methods, and conclusions.

The study of power and politics, our discipline, is itself a site of politics and power. Political scientists are hardly immune to the operation of intersecting inequalities. In a recent essay in *Politics and Gender Journal*, Melissa Harris-Lacewell writes that black women political scientists offer stories and perspectives rendered silent in research by their white male colleagues. Power for these women, she explains, is more than an abstract concept. Their vastly different life experiences include personal and community-based experiences of race/class/gender discrimination and

exploitation, leading them to formulate new research agendas, to focus on overlooked populations, and to ask questions in a different way than those who currently dominate political science. Such an understanding calls into question the value of ever studying gender, race, education, or class alone.

These are not easy questions: how do we define and study power? What is its role in creating and perpetuating inequalities? How do inequalities grow, build, and intersect? Can we as a discipline, itself a site of power relations and inequalities, objectively address these questions? Yet the challenge is precisely the point. Too many of the graduate students I know are content to work within accepted frameworks of research, using easily obtained data. This leaves us, as a discipline, in the situation of the proverbial drunk looking for his keys not where he dropped them, but where the street light shines brightest.

Taking seriously the power of intersectionality is of more than merely academic interest. Inequalities between the haves and have-nots are on the rise globally. In the U.S., inequalities persist along multiple axes, including (but not limited to): race, ethnicity, income, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, immigrant status, education, disability, size, age, and more. The impact of these inequalities and their intersections on politics, policy, public life, and political science is yet to be fully understood. Using intersectionality as a lens for political science research will help us to study power more realistically and to better understand the inequalities that haunt our claims of democratic legitimacy.

Of possible related interest: Chapters 10, 42, 48, 61.

Suggested additional reading

- Cohen, Cathy J. *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Hawkesworth, Mary. "Congressional Enactments of Race-Gender: Toward a Theory of Raced-Gendered Institutions." *American Political Science Review* 97 (2003): 529-550.
- Strolovitch, Dara Z. *Affirmative Advocacy: Race, Class, and Gender in Interest Group Politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007.