

# **The Politics of Women's Interests**

**New comparative  
perspectives**

**Louise Chappell  
and Lisa Hill**



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# The Politics of Women's Interests

Women have interests in common. They also have interests in conflict. This book explores some of the points at which women's interests coincide and considers how they can be aggregated in order to shape political discourses, rules and institutions.

Each of the studies in this volume considers the controversial question: What are 'women's interests'? The book begins with a systematic conceptual analysis and follows with examples of feminist engagement with key political institutions – both local and global – to show why this concept is important and useful in feminist politics today.

The book covers a range of institutional arenas – electoral systems, state-level bureaucracies, civil society, the EU, the UN and the International Criminal Court – in order to illuminate the ways in which women's interests shape and are shaped in these settings. The collected authors suggest that, while coalitions between women will always be fragile due to deep differences between them, it is strategically vital to retain 'women's interests' as a political category.

Looking at experiences in the US, UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, this book will be of great interest to students and researchers in the fields of gender studies, political science, and comparative politics.

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New comparative perspectives

**Edited by Louise Chappell and  
Lisa Hill**

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**To James and Julian**



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**Jill Vickers** is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and chancellor's professor of political science at Carleton University in Ottawa. Active in the women's movement, she was parliamentary chair of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, president of the Canadian Research Association for the Advancement of Women, and president of the Canadian Association of University Teachers. She is the author of a dozen books and many articles and reports to government about women in politics. The Canadian Political Science Association recently created the 'Jill Vickers Prize', to be awarded annually, in recognition of her founding role in feminist political science. Recent works include *The Politics of Race – Canada, Australia and the United States* (2002), *Gender, Race and Nation: A Global Perspective* (with Vanaja Druharajan, 2002), *Reinventing Political Science: A Feminist Approach* (1997), *Women and Nationalisms: Canadian Experiences* (with Michèle de Sève, 2000), and *Politics as if Women Mattered* (with Pauline Rankin and Christine Appelle, 1994). She is currently working on a 30-country study of women's involvements with nationalism and nation-building.

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# Glossary

**ACT** Australian Capital Territory.

**ALAC** Australian Labor Advisory Council.

**ALP** Australian Labor Party.

**ANOVA** Analysis of variance, a test used to compare means (averages) between groups.

**ASEAN** Association of South East Asian Nations.

**BC** British Columbia, one of the provinces in the Canadian federal system. Provinces in Canada are analogous to states in the Australian or United States federal systems.

**BC CEDAW group** A coalition of women's groups in British Columbia that prepared and presented a submission to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in early 2003, for consideration during CEDAW's review of the Fifth Report presented to it by the Government of Canada.

**BES** British Election Study.

**CAWS** Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services, a ministry in the provincial government of British Columbia established following the 2001 election.

**CEDAW** The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

**Chi-square test** A test of association for two qualitative variables.

**Confirmatory factor analysis** Factor analysis that tests a specified relationship between the variables.

**Correlation coefficient** A test of association for two quantitative variables.

**Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient** A test for the internal reliability of a scale. Values close to one indicate nearly perfect reliability.

**CSW** UN Commission on the Status of Women.

**DACOWITS** Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (United States).

**DAW** United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women.

**District magnitude** In proportional representation systems the districts are multi-member. In Chapter 5 district magnitude does not refer to

the geographical size of the district, but the number of members that can be elected from a particular district.

**EC** European Community.

**ECHR** European Convention on Human Rights.

**ECJ** European Court of Justice.

**ECOSOC** Economic and Social Council.

**EMILY's List** A national organization (Australia) that promotes the election to Parliament of progressive Labor women through financial, training and mentoring assistance to endorsed candidates at both the State and Federal levels.

**EOC** Elements of Crimes Document.

**ERA** Equal Rights Amendment.

**EU** European Union.

**Euratom** European Atomic Energy Community.

**EWL** European Women's Lobby.

**Factor analysis** A test for common factors between a number of variables.

**FAO** Food and Agriculture Organization.

**Femocrat** Feminist bureaucrat.

**FFQ** Quebec Federation of Women/Federation des Femmes de Quebec.

**First-past-the-post** An electoral system, usually used in conjunction with single-member districts, where the person with the most votes wins the seat, irrespective of how many votes they receive. In other words, there is no requirement to obtain a majority of votes.

**FTE** Full-time equivalent position.

**FWCW** Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing).

**GAD** Gender and development.

**Gender quota** A rule which aims to increase the legislative presence of women. Gender quotas can be categorized into three broad strategies: as reserved seats for women; as national legislative quotas; or as political party quotas. Some initiatives have been enshrined in law, with financial penalties applied to parties that do not abide; while others have been voluntarily adopted by (usually) left-leaning parties.

**Hare-Clark** The Hare-Clark electoral system is a single transferable vote (STV, see below) method of proportional representation used in multi-member electorates. It is named after Thomas Hare (1806–1891), who wrote on proportional representation, and Andrew Inglis Clark (1848–1907), a Tasmanian Attorney-General, who introduced proportional representation into State law (Australian Capital Territory Electoral Commission). Hare-Clark differs from other STV methods in several ways: there is a technical difference in the way votes are transferred from candidates elected on the first count and candidates eliminated; it is usually used in conjunction with Robson Rotation; and casual vacancies are filled by a recount rather than a casual vacancy.

**Histadrut** Umbrella labour union in pre-state Israel (Palestine).

- ICC** International Criminal Court.
- ICCPR** International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- ICESCR** International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.
- ICJ** International Court of Justice.
- ICTR** International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.
- ICTY** International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia.
- IDEA** Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.
- IGO** Intergovernmental Organization.
- ILO** International Labour Organization.
- IMF** International Monetary Fund.
- Interpol** International Criminal Police Commission.
- IOM** International Organization for Migration.
- IPU** Inter-parliamentary Union.
- IUCN** World Conservation Union.
- IWHRC** International Women's Human Rights Law Clinic.
- IWY** International Women's Year.
- LEAF** Legal Education and Action Fund. An organization which presents test cases on women's rights and gender issues.
- Majoritarian** A system that requires the winning candidate to receive a majority (more than half) of the vote to ensure election.
- MCFD** Ministry of Children and Family Development. A ministry in the provincial government of British Columbia; formerly the Ministry for Children and Families, established by the New Democratic Party government in 1996.
- Mixed member proportional (MMP)** A representation system that provides electors with two votes. One is used to elect an electorate representative by means of a simple plurality system and the second to elect representatives from a party list.
- MSF** Médecins Sans Frontières.
- MSP** Medical Services Plan. A provincial government programme through which eligible, medically necessary services are insured in the province of British Columbia. Administration of the programme was contracted out to the private sector in early 2005.
- MWA** Ministry of Women's Affairs, a ministry in the government of Aotearoa/New Zealand, established following the 1984 election.
- MWE** Ministry of Women's Equality, a ministry in the provincial government of British Columbia established after the 1991 provincial election and dismantled following the 2001 provincial election.
- NAC** National Action Committee on the Status of Women, an umbrella organization formed in 1972 which aggregates the views of over 600 feminist groups in Canada. Currently inactive.
- NCBW** National Congress of Black Women.
- NDP** New Democratic Party, a provincial political party on the centre-left of the political spectrum that formed the government in British Columbia 1991–2001.

**NGO** Non-governmental organization.

**NOW** The National Organization of Women, a chapter-based, hierarchical organization (USA).

**NPM** New public management.

**NWPC** National Women's Political Caucus.

**OAS** Organization of American States.

**OECD** Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

**OPEC** Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries.

**PACs** Political Action Committees.

**Party list** A proportional system in which each party puts up a list of candidates. Voters indicate their preference for a particular party and the parties then receive seats in proportion to their share of the vote. Districts are usually quite large in this system. There are two broad types of list systems: closed and open. In a closed list system the party fixes the order in which the candidates are listed and elected, and the voter simply casts a vote for the party as a whole. The open list approach allows voters to express a preference for particular candidates, not just parties.

**PrepCom** Preparatory Committee.

**Proportional representation** An electoral system in which legislators are elected in multi-member districts, meaning there are a number of winning candidates in each district. Each elected candidate represents the same proportion of voters as every other elected candidate.

**Robson Rotation** A modification that ensures that the names of candidates are printed in different orders on consecutive ballot papers. This is done so that no candidate appears in the same position on every ballot paper. Electoral systems experts consider the top and bottom positions to be the most favourable positions for candidates. The use of Robson Rotation also reduces the influence of political parties by impeding them from directing voters to list candidates in a particular order (Australian Capital Territory Electoral Commission).

**RPE** Rules of Procedures and Evidence.

**Sainte-Lague formula** One of a number of formulae that can be used to allocate seats under party list systems. The outcome tends to favour minor parties over major parties in that it is harder for major parties to win each additional seat (for details of the formula see G. Newman (1996) 'New Zealand's new electoral system: From FPP to MMP', Research Note 6, Canberra: Department of the Parliamentary Library).

**SAP** Structural Adjustment Plan.

**STV** Single transferable vote. A proportional system in which voters are required to rank individual candidates according to their preference. A candidate must receive the calculated threshold quota in order to be elected. Any candidates whose first preference votes equal or exceed the quota are declared elected. Votes surplus to the quota cast for

successful candidates are transferred amongst the remaining candidates according to the second preferences recorded by the voter.

**TEC** Treaty Establishing the European Community.

**TEU** Treaty on the European Union.

**Threshold quota** The minimum percentage of votes that a candidate requires in order to be elected. In some systems this quota is fixed at 5 per cent (e.g. in New Zealand). In others it is based on a more complex calculation. For example in the Australian Senate the threshold quota is arrived at by dividing the total number of formal ballot papers by one more than the number of vacancies, and then adding one to the result.

**ToA** Treaty of Amsterdam.

**ToM** Treaty of Maastricht.

**UDHR** Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

**UK** United Kingdom.

**UN** United Nations.

**UNCHR** United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

**UNDP** United Nations Development Programme.

**UNESCO** United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

**UNGA** United Nations General Assembly.

**UNHCR** United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

**UNICEF** United Nations Children's Fund.

**UNIFEM** United Nations Development Fund for Women.

**UNSC** United Nations Security Council.

**VAP** Voting age population.

**WCGJ** Women's Caucus for Gender Justice.

**WEAL** Women's Equity Action League.

**WEL** Women's Electoral Lobby.

**WHO** World Health Organization.

**WID** Women in Development.

**WIJG** Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice.

**WNC** Women's National Coalition.

**WTO** World Trade Organization.

**WWC** Women Workers' Council. A women's caucus within the *Histadrut*.



# 1 Introduction

## The politics of women's interests

*Lisa Hill and Louise Chappell*

Women have interests in common. They also have interests in conflict. In this book we are interested in exploring some of those points at which women's interests coincide and how they can be aggregated in such a way as to be able to shape the way in which political discourses, rules and institutions affect women. The chapters are mainly comparative in nature, drawing on experiences internationally as well as in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the US, and the United Kingdom. We take a broad view of political institutions to include the bureaucracy, parliament, legal structures, civil society and electoral institutions, as well as regional and international political institutions such as the European Union and the United Nations. The concept of 'interest' is understood to consist of two related aspects: 'the form aspect' which denotes the demand for involvement and control over politics and public affairs and the 'content or result aspect' relating to the issue of the substantive values 'that politics puts into effect and distributes' (Jónasdóttir 1988: 40).

Each author, either implicitly or explicitly, explores the question of whether or not it is proper to speak of women as having specific interests distinct from those of men. We are well aware that assuming there is a definable women's interest necessitates a successful navigation between what Jodi Dean has described as the Scylla of 'essentialist exclusion' and the Charybdis of 'constructivist de-politicization'. It is important to acknowledge 'the richness and complexity of women's experiences' without sacrificing a capacity to theorize 'the conditions for and possibilities of feminism as a political movement' (Dean 1997: 2).

For many years, feminists in the West made the mistake of assuming that women shared all interests in common – constructing and imposing a notion of universal womanhood. A strong critique was developed in response to this over-generalization. Women from post-colonial states joined with others in the West experiencing inequalities based on racial, sexual, and ethnic difference, to argue that women's lives were far too disparate and diverse to speak of a common interest between them. As the pendulum swung away from similarities to differences, the notion of 'women's politics' was replaced with 'gender politics', which focused more

on discursive practices than on the importance (and use) of power within political institutions. But this created a new set of problems. As Jill Vickers notes in this volume, 'unrelieved difference is as unrealistic as undivided commonality'. Further, the shift towards difference became paralysing for the development of new ideas and strategies about how women engage in politics, leaving men comfortably in control of the institutions that shape women's lives and gender practices.

Finding a way to cut through this 'either similar or different' approach to women's interests has become imperative at a point in history where the feminist movement itself is under attack from a number of directions. This becomes clear when reading Marian Sawer's account of the apparent abeyance of the feminist movement in recent years and it holds equally in western liberal states, such as the US, Canada, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand as it does in other contexts. The rise of neo-liberal (and, in some cases, socially conservative) governments has led to the retreat of the state in favour of market forces. This trend has, in turn, enabled, if not encouraged, a reassertion of individual over collective interests (see Sawer in this volume and 2003). The combination of these broader ideological shifts, which are reflected in the policies and practices of political institutions, and the emphasis on *difference* by some feminist theorists and activists, has led to the neglect of many of the inequities shared by women as a group. Left uncontested are such issues as women's low rates of political representation, low incomes and a significant wages gender gap, as well as the limited (and dwindling) provision of childcare, health and social services. Also left unaddressed is the persisting emphasis in neo-liberal and conservative policies and discourse on women's 'appropriate' or 'natural' gender roles as mothers and wives.

This book represents an attempt to bridge the gap between 'sameness' and 'difference' approaches to women's interests. The contributing authors work from the assumption that women do share some political interests, but they also accept that important differences exist between women as a group. Through delicate and mutable alliances, women may adopt a 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak 1995; Jhappan 1996) that enables them to work for a period of time toward a single objective but this does not mean that they will automatically share other interests in all political spaces. Positing the existence of specific gender interests does not preclude the possibility that there may be specific cultural interests; moreover, neither does it mean that there can be no general human interests.

Jill Vickers takes up this first point in Chapter 2 where she argues that 'although common interests *may* exist, it is more likely that *any* aggregate of women has both shared and conflicting interests'. Nevertheless, where women do find common ground on specific issues and can articulate shared objectives, the notion of women's interests becomes a necessary and powerful political tool for women's actors.

For Vickers, and other contributors to this volume, women's interests

are fragile but also dynamic. They are not fixed but are constructed through political processes over time. Institutional practices and discourses shape the way men and women are conceived and through this process gender stereotypes and expectations are constructed. While historically women and their interests were defined very narrowly, these can alter over time and place. As a number of the following chapters show, this change can occur primarily through the acceptance and construction of new discourses and practices brought about by women's engagement with institutions.

The contributing authors take as given the central importance of political institutions and processes in constructing the nature of women's interests. Accordingly, they adopt a pragmatic and strategic attitude towards women's engagement with these institutions. As Vickers reminds us, avoiding 'public' politics and interaction with the state is not an option for women; to do so leaves the power with those in formal institutions, primarily men, to go on defining women's interests as if they know what they are. Thus in order to pursue any shared interests women must embrace politics and its institutions. But in doing so they are not simply involved in a process of co-option – a point elaborated on by Roth in this volume. It is important to conceive of institutions, whether bureaucratic, legal or representative in nature, as operating in a co-constitutive way with those seeking institutional engagement. On the one hand, institutions play a role in shaping (and constraining) social identities, including those of women, while on the other, social groups, including women, help to shape the institutions.

Chapters in this book point to examples where, through their engagement with political institutions, women's activists have had some success in expanding conceptions of women and their interests. The ability of feminist actors to refine the prevailing conception of women's interests at the supra-national level (see Guerrina Chapter 9, Smith Chapter 10, and Chappell Chapter 11), through the bureaucracy (see Sawer Chapter 6, Teghtsoonian Chapter 7, and Roth Chapter 8) and through electoral politics (see Campbell Chapter 3, Hill Chapter 4, and Curtin Chapter 5) gives empirical support to the wisdom of women's continuing and proactive involvement in 'mainstream' politics.

Accepting that women's engagement in political institutions makes a difference in terms of expanding public conceptions of women and their interests is not an evasion of the fact that there are often serious limitations to these interventions. As Benita Roth suggests, 'feminist fading' can occur even in the most 'friendly' of institutions. In relation to the EU Roberta Guerrina and Merryn Smith show how problematic engagement can be when women's interests are included in policy debates but are constructed too narrowly.

The examples we highlight of successes and limitations of efforts to aggregate and articulate politically women's interests point to some

important lessons for future feminist organizing. Hill's chapter underlines how increasingly vital is the women's vote to the success or failure of political parties; Curtin reminds us that proportional electoral systems are not a 'cure-all' for women's representation in electoral politics but that these electoral processes will only make a difference when they are combined with a concern by political parties for deep and systemic improvements to the representation of women. Sawyer, Roth, Teghtsoonian and Chappell all emphasize the importance of having both *insider* and *outsider* activists working together to push for the advancement of new conceptions of women's interests.

While it is important to recognize the success of some women in using political institutions to advance their objectives, it would be unwise to assume that these positive developments are permanent or predictable, particularly in light of the shift toward neo-liberalism and, in some instances, (neo) conservatism in the comparative settings included in this volume. Because political institutions, whether at a domestic or international level, still tend to be dominated by men and male-centered thinking and practice, women's efforts to express and re-define what is understood to be their 'interests' will continue to meet with resistance. The chapters that follow are written with this sobering reality in mind, and in some cases look for ways of overcoming it.

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