Opportunity Structures: The Key to Women’s Access

After World War II, Western European societies were divided largely along class, religious, and urban and rural lines (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Rose and Urwin, 1970). Beginning in the 1970s, these reliable groupings gradually diversified (Dalton et al., 1985; Crewe and Denver, 1985). Citizens became increasingly concerned with new issues such as environmental quality, alternative lifestyles, and gender equality (Inglehart, 1977; 1997). Much previous research has concentrated on the role of new parties, namely New Left parties, in representing these new concerns (Mueller-Rommel, 1989; Kitschelt, 1989). However, we know less about the effects of new issues on established parties. Although new issues may have the potential to disintegrate the existing partisan alignment, Mair and Smith (1990) argue that most new issues are absorbed within the framework of traditional left and right ideology. “For all the changes experienced in recent years, it is clear that left and right not only remain the major organizing principles in modern West European politics, but also help to create a uniform foundation for contemporary patterns of political competition” (175).

Empirical research supports this claim that established parties in Western Europe have adopted many of these new issues. Klingemann et al. (1994) find that the percentage of references to issues such as environmental quality and minority rights has steadily increased in party manifests over the past several decades. Likewise, Rohrschneider (1993a) finds that, across four nations,
established leftist parties are “considerably more able than previously assumed to absorb the environmental challenge.” Given that established parties are addressing issues beyond the traditional socioeconomic concerns that have historically defined their agendas, it is essential to examine the process by which parties incorporate these new concerns.

The campaign for gender equality represents one prominent new issue. In the 1960s and 1970s, feminism resurfaced as a strong social movement in most postindustrial societies (Gelb, 1989). Although the movement has been composed of diverse ideologies, forms of action, and organization, one common theme has been the demand for the democratization of social and political life (Jenson, 1995). Some wings of the women’s movement eschewed working within established political channels, but many groups pressed political parties for political representation of women (Lovenduski and Norris, 1993). Women’s demands for representation are both programmatic and organizational, and this book centers on the latter. With varying degrees of success, women made concerted efforts to be included in parties, even at the highest rank—parliamentary office.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I draw from existing scholarship to set out the components of party opportunity structure. Second, I point out some of the limitations of previous theories of party change and conceptualize the sequence of change within parties. Finally, I combine structure and sequence to offer a model for women’s gains in elected office.

Conditions of Party Change: The “Opportunity Structure”

So why do some established parties respond to the challenges of new demands? More specifically, why did some political parties react to the pressure to promote women candidates for parliament while others did not? And why did those parties take action at the time they did? The role of the party in increasing women’s access is a case of a broader process of party organizational change, or incorporation of new contenders.

The established party literature does not offer a clear, systematic theory to account for how and why political parties incorporate new contenders. This book offers an integrated and dynamic theory that considers both the direction of dominant forces for party changes and the way those forces interact with the party’s opportunity structure. I argue that the likelihood and sequence in which a party will either absorb or create new constituencies is shaped by the set of rules, norms, and political conditions in which the party is embedded. Taken together, these factors structure opportunities for both parties and women. Simply put, opportunity structure shapes the degree to which efforts, both from the top and bottom of the party organization, will succeed or fail.
CHAPTER 2

Considering the receptivity of parties to women’s demands explains, in large part, why political parties promote women candidates when they do.

The importance of an opportunity structure to timing the translation of citizen demands is rooted in Sidney Tarrow’s (1989; 1994) research on social movements. Tarrow develops the concept of “political opportunity structure” to explain why collective action emerges in some instances and not others. This opportunity structure framework has been applied to the women’s movement (Katzenstein and Mueller, 1987; Gelb, 1989; 2002), the environmental movement (Kitschelt, 1986), new social movements in general (Kriesi et al., 1992), and the civil rights movement in the United States (McAdam, 1982). Similarly, Herbert Kitschelt (1994) argues for the efficacy of opportunity structure within political parties in his analysis of the divergent electoral fortunes of nine socialist parties in Western Europe. In this book, I build upon this framework for opportunity structure by examining the entrance of a new group of contenders vying for a voice within the party, and ultimately in parliament.

Specific to this research, opportunity structure sheds light on the constraints and incentives that condition women’s strategies within political parties. Certainly these contextual characteristics do not act as agents of change, but they do intervene in the process of political change to make it more or less likely for a group of party leaders to take strategic action. I break down the concept of opportunity structure into two categories, political and institutional. Political opportunity structure describes the broader ideological environment within which political parties operate and focuses on shifts in the balance of political power between contending groups, which open up windows of opportunity for change. Institutional opportunity structure consists of both the “rules of the game” that shape party behavior and the efforts of new contenders.

Furthermore, each set of structures operates both within the party, and in the party system at large. The set of exogenous factors includes a dense set of external rules that guide party behavior. In a similar fashion, the set of endogenous factors offers some reasons for how and why party elites may exercise control over party change. Table 2.1 summarizes the specific set of conditions I expect to constitute the “political opportunity structure” and the “institutional opportunity structure,” both within and outside of the party, and I draw out these expectations in the sections below.

This book focuses less attention on how parties differ in these characteristics, and more on how the characteristics intervene in the process of change. In the following sections, these theoretical “opportunity structures” will be linked to hypotheses about the ability and willingness of a party to incorporate women.
Political Opportunity Structure

Political opportunity structure describes the broad power balance within which actors operate—either at the elite or at the mass level. Sidney Tarrow (1989) aptly describes this power balance as the “ebb and flow of political tides” (25). These are the broad political conditions that surround women’s efforts to gain greater representation and to influence the priority given to this issue by political parties.

Electoral Instability

New challengers can make greater inroads within political parties during periods of electoral instability. For example, Piven and Cloward’s (1977) research in the United States on Civil Rights points toward the importance of electoral volatility in the South in altering the Democratic Party’s strategy to attract a new group of supporters. Likewise, party realignment is key to changing the power balance in Sidney Tarrow’s (1994) theory of the rise and decline of social movements.

Social divisions based on class and religion once structured party competition in Western Europe (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). The shift from industrial to service-dominated economies, rising levels of affluence and education, and secularization undercut these traditional divisions. In the post–World War II period, citizens were less likely to align with parties based on strong class loyalties (Franklin et al., 1991), and a declining proportion of unionized workers in most postindustrial democracies (Griffin, McCammon, and Botsko, 1990; Gray and Caul, 2000) left parties seeking new groups to supplement their electoral bases. The declining strength of the traditional class-based groups has opened the door for new contenders to become important to the party.

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### Table 2.1 Opportunity Structure for Increasing Women’s Representation in Parliament

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Further, women’s voting patterns have shifted over this same period. The early research on women’s voting behavior in Western Europe established that in the 1960s and 1970s, women were more conservative than men, both in their attitudes and in their partisan loyalties (Duverger, 1955; Lipset, 1962; Butler and Stokes, 1974: 160; Inglehart, 1977: 229). Scholars often attributed this conservative, or “traditional,” gender gap to structural factors, such as women’s higher rates of church attendance and their low participation in the paid workforce (DeVaus and McAllister, 1989; Inglehart, 1981; Baxter and Lansing, 1983).

During the 1980s, however, differences between women’s and men’s electoral behavior gradually faded. Women were no longer consistently more conservative, and in some cases moved toward the Left (Jelen, Thomas, and Wilcox, 1994). Increasing similarity between men and women in both partisanship and the vote was identified in Britain (Heath et al., 1985; Hayes and McAllister, 1997; Norris, 1999) and in Western Europe overall (deVaus and McAllister, 1989; Studlar, McAllister, and Hayes 1998). Scholars often link the transformation in women’s conservatism to the transformation of women’s lives in the postwar period. Religiosity and church attendance among women decreased, and their collective educational and workforce participation levels increased.

By the late 1990s, empirical research suggested that women were moving to the left of men in their vote and partisanship. This new gender gap was first identified in the United States in the early 1980s (Klein, 1985). Inglehart and Norris’s (1998) comprehensive study from 1980 to 1995 shows that in the early 1980s, women were more right-wing than men in most advanced industrial democracies, yet by 1995 women were more left-wing in most nations. Further, unlike the findings of deVaus and McAllister (1989), Inglehart and Norris found that the gender gap is less reliant on structural forces, but rather on the shift in attitudes and values associated with feminism and postmaterialism. And among younger generations, young women tend to be more left-wing than young men, and one might expect that the gender gap will continue to grow over time.

Thus, the “unanchoring” of women’s votes has created an atmosphere of new opportunity, and the possibility for parties to court women’s votes as a group. Past case study research on women and politics in Britain and Germany begins to link shifts in women’s voting behavior to women’s parliamentary representation (Kolinsky, 1992; Norris, 1999). Yet previous research has neither fully drawn out the links between the two nor tested this relationship systematically.

Certainly where women coordinate their efforts to visibly show their electoral support for women-friendly parties, parties are most likely to take notice. Mona Lena Krook’s (2002) research in Sweden shows that competition
between the Swedish parties over women’s votes intensified after women threatened to form their own women’s party if they did not make substantial gains on the party lists. In response, five Swedish parties began alternating the names of men and women on the party lists.

The Rise of New Issues

These broad social transformations and their concomitant shifts in values and attitudes have altered the political issue agenda (Inglehart, 1977; 1997). Specific to women’s representation, as women entered higher education and the paid workforce en masse, women’s changing roles in the public sphere became a more salient issue. Based on identity rather than economic status, concern for women’s representation attracts supporters based upon concerns for equality or for empowerment. Women’s empowerment is part of a larger package of “New Left” issues in Western Europe that also includes environmentalism, nuclear proliferation, and alternative lifestyles.

These “New Left” issues are often carried to mainstream politics by social movements. The women’s movement “resurged” in the late 1960s across Western Europe and intensified efforts to gain a foothold in partisan politics. Underneath the broad pattern of resurgence of the women’s movement in the 1970s, research on the women’s movement in Western Europe reveals variation in the amount and type of pressure on parties across both parties and nations (Gelb, 1989; Kaplan, 1992). Once women began to concentrate efforts in party politics, they gained greater power, resources, and opportunities to directly pressure for representation at the highest level of the party. Further, a shift in focus from “separatism” in the 1970s toward greater “integration” and partisan politics in the 1980s and 1990s heightened the salience of the issue of women’s representation (Krook, 2001).

In addition, inequalities in the presence of men and women in national legislatures gained international recognition as an enduring problem. The key organizational force in bringing the issue of women’s parliamentary representation to the world agenda has been the United Nations, which sponsored several international conferences addressing women’s global status in 1975 in Mexico City, in 1980 in Copenhagen, in 1985 in Nairobi, and in 1995 in Beijing. The United Nations declared 1975 the “International Women’s Year,” which soon expanded to the “Decade for Women,” 1976 to 1985. In 1979 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and, 187 nations have signed it. Women’s activism initially sparked United Nations attention to women’s equality, and in reciprocal fashion, the United Nations conferences and parallel nongovernmental organization forums have fostered the growth of a global feminist movement that addresses women’s representation among
other women’s issues (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). The United Nations’ activities and women’s international networking have heightened the importance of women’s equality at the national level. In an event history analysis of 157 nations from 1975 to 1998, True and Mintrom (2001) find that greater transnational networking increases the likelihood that a country will adopt formal agencies and rules to consider the impact of new legislation on women’s equality.

Structure of Party System Competition

In a similar fashion, competition between parties often opens up new windows of opportunity for women in political parties. Several scholars suggest that competitive pressures generated by rival parties motivate party change (Harmel and Svansand, 1997; Appleton and Ward, 1997). In a strategic process, one party motivates another to change its behavior. The expectation is that an established party will adopt a new issue after a successful entrepreneurial party “steals” part of its traditional voting bloc on the basis of that issue(s). Further, the new party has the greatest impact on the established party when they are neighbors on the ideological continuum. For example, Rohrschneider’s (1993) cross-national study of leftist parties in four European nations reveals that electoral successes by New Left parties stimulated the established Old Left parties to respond to environmental issues. Likewise, Harmel and Svansand’s (1997) research suggests that even the introduction of a new rightist party can pressure neighboring established parties. In both Norway and Denmark, the entrance of a new Progress Party motivated the larger Conservative Party to respond to new issue demands. The new ideologically-driven party was able to get its issues onto the mainstream agenda without gaining a large vote share, but rather by pushing the major party to perceive the new party as a future problem.

Specific to parties’ incorporation of women, case study evidence points toward a process of change across the party system—where one party initiates change to seek competitive advantage, rival parties may follow suit. Krook (2002) aptly titles the parties that initiate the competition through innovative policies as the “pro-active” parties, and those that follow the “reactive parties.” The emergence of a New Left party that competes for women’s votes may elevate women’s representation to heightened salience and spur an established party to respond. Matland and Studlar (1996) detail this “contagion” effect within the party systems of Norway and Canada. After a small entrepreneurial party in each system began promoting women, larger rival parties anticipated a loss of votes and responded by running higher numbers of women themselves. In France in 1992, the Greens began running lists of candidates with equal numbers of women and men, heightening the visibility of
claims for parity (Jenson and Valiente, 2003). Although party-level quotas were initially deemed unconstitutional in 1982, efforts culminated in state-level policies to bring more women to the National Assembly. In June 2000, France amended its Constitution to change Article 3, allowing for positive action to bring a balance among men and women elected officials (Jenson and Valiente, 2003). Likewise, Lisa Baldez (2003) examines the adoption of a national gender quota law in Mexico and theorizes that a party-level contagion in quotas may even give parties incentive to push for a national candidate quota policy. Parties across the spectrum may favor such a law in an effort to neutralize the electoral advantage that one individual party might gain. In other words, parties may seek state intervention to even the playing field for all.

Reorganization of Power within the Party

Party elites are those within the decision-making groups of the party; they shape the positions parties will take on issues, and the image the party will project to voters. Party elites are concerned with the party’s electoral fortunes, and as such, they act in a strategic manner to align the party with issues that they expect will expand the party’s base and secure votes. The party leadership, whether by conversion or turnover, may change their calculus concerning how support for an issue may contribute to their ability to attract support.

First, new leadership often leads to new policies and behaviors. New leaders may make deliberate and conscious choices to consolidate their power and to advance the party’s goals (Harmel and Janda, 1994). Christina Wolbrecht (2000) argues that this replacement of the old guard with newcomers—elite turnover—was instrumental in changing party positions in the United States. In comparative perspective, evidence from six parties in the United Kingdom and Germany from 1991 to 1993 reveals that decisions made by new internal leaders or new dominant factions are an important force in bringing change in the status quo (Harmel et al., 1995). Further, even when electoral losses are taken into account, changes in the party leadership exert an independent and powerful influence on party change. For example, in a case study of the Austrian Socialist Party, Wolfgang Mueller (1997) shows that the party’s transition from mass communications to professionalized campaign techniques flowed directly from the decisions of new leaders. After a poor electoral performance, Socialist leaders assessed the party’s problems and designed strategies to increase the party’s vote share in the next election.

With regard to women’s claims within party politics, elites have often pursued a strategy of neglect, and this is the pattern of elite behavior that Harvey (2003) finds in the early half of the twentieth century in the United States. Similarly, even since the 1970s, Sanbonmatsu (2001) finds Democratic and Republican party leaders have still largely ignored most women’s equality
issues, choosing not to build electoral support based on gender alignments. However, the addition of women to the subset of party elites may introduce a new perspective on the utility of women’s votes. Past research in the United States shows that women in office are more likely than their male counterparts to introduce women’s rights legislation (Burrell, 1994), to include representing women’s interests in their understanding of their role as representative (Thomas, 1994), and to sponsor women’s rights legislation (Wolbrecht, 2000).

Rather than turnover, a subset of existing party elites may gain a new understanding of the importance of certain issues, and their potential for party support. To explain divergent party responses to issues, it is essential to consider the perceptions by political actors that responding to new issues will benefit the party. In other words, party leaders must come to see their interests in a new light. This process is analogous to the “perceived presence of support” that is an aspect of Tarrow’s (1989) opportunity framework for social movements. For example, in an investigation of the different responses of European Socialist parties to new economic conditions, Frank Wilson (1994) argues for the importance of shifts in the attitudes of party leaders, who prioritized the needs of their parties, chose among a variety of tactics and strategies to address the problem, and then persuaded party members to follow them.

Importantly, new contenders’ efforts can alter party leaders’ perceptions of the value of the group’s support. Doug McAdam (1982) argues for the importance of “new frames of meaning” in gaining support for the demands of an insurgent group. McAdam et al. (2001) contend that framing “mediates between opportunity and action” (41). In other words, new contenders make gains when they pitch their demands in a manner that connects the group and its leaders under a common ground. For political parties, that common ground is most likely electoral support. Therefore, women’s efforts within political parties may be most likely to gain favor among party leaders when they are couched as part of a larger strategy to benefit the party at the polls.

**Institutional Opportunity Structure**

Institutions also condition access to party hierarchies, and the party itself may be said to have an “institutional opportunity structure.” Furthermore, parties are embedded in a larger set of electoral rules that shape party strategy. The importance of institutions in shaping divergent responses to common challenges is emphasized by the “new institutionalist” literature (March and Olson, 1989; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). Steinmo et al. (1992) state that “institutions constrain and refract politics, but they are never the sole ‘cause’ of outcomes.” As such, institutions mediate, or filter, the relationship between
political actors’ efforts and outcomes. Following North’s (1990) seminal definition, institutions include both norms and formal rules—whether consciously designed or unintended consequences. Clearly such features of parties as standard practices, organizational structures, and formal rules fall under this definition. The importance of intraparty institutions such as these has been highlighted in past research—but the focus has been limited to how power structures shape a party’s electoral fortunes or policymaking (Panebianco, 1988; Kitschelt, 1994).

Electoral System Rules

The electoral system represents a key set of rules outside the party. Several studies have established that party list PR electoral systems with large, multi-member districts yield higher numbers of women in parliament than plurality (single-member district) systems (Rule, 1987; Matland, 1993). Women and politics scholars have long theorized that parties are less likely to run a woman in a single-member district system because they can only run a single candidate and fear losing the seat to a male competitor. In contrast, in party-list system parties, where parties nominate several candidates, parties are more likely to add women to the list of candidates in order to broaden the party’s appeal and to balance the ticket. A woman candidate can be seen as a benefit to the ticket by attracting votes, without requiring that established politicians step aside. The logic behind the strong relationship between electoral system and women’s representation attributes a great deal of explanatory power to party leaders, who presumably act in the best electoral interest of their parties.

Importantly, electoral rules also structure competition across the party system, which in turn affects institutions within parties. A proportional representation (PR) system encourages new parties, while single-member district, winner-take-all systems discourage third parties, because voters fear third-party votes will be wasted (Duverger, 1955). The ability of a marginalized group to take its demands to a small, entrepreneurial party, or even to form its own party, may motivate established parties to respond to the challenges of the marginalized group.

In addition, electoral rules pace the rate of turnover among elected officials. In this way, single-member districts can act as a drag on women’s progress. In single-member districts, elected officials act as representatives of geographically based constituencies. Through the candidate-centered process, bolstered by individual case work and name recognition, incumbents gain great advantage and normally retain their seats for several terms in office. Thus, a district with an incumbent often earns the title “safe seat.” An abundance of safe seats means few open seats for new challengers such as women (Darcy and Beckwith, 1987, as cited in Darcy et al., 1994).
Specific institutional forms both influence the permeability of the party to new challenges and shape the processes through which decisions are made (Weaver and Rockman, 1993). Certain organizational characteristics within the party constrain the ability and the willingness of a party to respond to new pressures, and they control the form of that response. Together, the degree of centralization, factionalization, institutionalization, and party ideology are the most important rules and norms within parties vis-à-vis the institutional opportunity structure for new contenders.

The first internal structure, the party’s degree of centralization, describes the distribution of control over decision making among the levels of the party hierarchy. Epstein (1980) theorized that more decentralized parties will be more likely to change. The stimulus for change is usually detected at the local level, and centralized parties could miss this stimulus. Bolstering this theory, in an empirical study of the changing nature of four European social democratic parties, Kitschelt (1994) finds that the ability of parties to change is a function of the openness of the party organization at the grassroots level. A more decentralized, loose structure encourages the influx of new ideas and “innovation from below.”

Although party activists at the local level may perceive a need for the party to adapt, local activists in a centralized party have little power to enact that change. Thus it may be a more centralized party organization that facilitates the flow of information between party units and directs information toward the top of the organization, thus enabling party leaders to encounter new challenges (Appleton and Ward, 1997). Further, Kitschelt (1994) finds that autonomy of the party leadership from collateral organizations allows party leaders to act strategically upon the impulses received from the grass roots. Thus, ties and previous commitments to outside groups may conceivably constrain a party in its response to newcomers.

In addition, parties with structures capable of recognizing new challenges quickly are often more likely to respond to new groups (Kitschelt, 1994). Parties with a greater number of strong ties to outside groups (more highly factionalized) and a tradition of allowing organized interest groups to have a say in party decision-making processes should be more likely to extend this access to newcomers. Panebianco (1988) argues that parties with a great deal of internal conflict learn to more easily absorb new demands. Similarly, through a case study of the intraparty decision making of Austrian parties, Mueller and Meth-Cohn (1995) theorize that highly factionalized parties tend to develop integrating strategies to reduce the potential for and the effects of conflict.

Likewise, parties with deeply engrained ideological orientations and fixed
rules absorb fewer challenges. This aptitude for ideological and rule flexibility is a party’s “degree of institutionalization.” Panebianco (1988) hypothesizes that reliance on standardized rules impedes change, because parties that integrate new issues must be flexible and open to new demands. Where leaders are subject to many bureaucratic rules, their strategic flexibility is inhibited. And strict adherence to the party program may be linked to factionalism—if a party is entrenched in the functional specialization of roles, this situation may also discourage factionalism, and the party may have trouble responding to new challenges (Kitschelt, 1994).

Further, rigid procedures shape the nature of the process by which MPs are recruited. Highly regulated parties provide all potential MPs, especially those without ties to the power center, with a set of understandable rules. Czudnowski (1975) reasons that the more institutionalized the selection process, the easier it is for any outsider to understand how the selection process works. The aspiring officeholders anticipate the criteria by which each applicant will be judged. In addition, party leaders have less leeway to bend the rules in favor of certain candidates. Weakly institutionalized parties tend to bias candidate nomination in favor of those who have accumulated “personal political capital,” resources based upon personal status or external group support (Guadagnini, 1993).

Finally, a party’s ideology shapes its ability to change. The seminal research of Duverger (1945) first highlighted the importance of ideology in shaping party behavior. Similarly, Kitschelt (1994) argues that a party’s response is constrained by its existing framework of ideas and traditions. The party’s past ideological debates frame the new debates and condition the willingness of party to listen to new demands. In short, a party’s solution to a new problem or challenge is conditioned by its history.

The ideological congruence between movement and party is key to the process of change. In the case of women’s representation, leftist parties, which harbor more egalitarian ideologies overall, are more sympathetic to the interests of a marginalized group. The party leadership in leftist parties finds it easier to absorb and channel an issue that is consistent with the party’s present values.

**Opportunity Structure and the Sequence of Party Change**

Certainly the conditions for opportunity are important, but one must also consider the efficacy of different sources of pressure for change. How do women’s efforts and party leaders’ efforts interact with the opportunity structure? Two simplified theories of the flow of change within political parties can be extracted from the broader literature on the sequence of political change.
and adaptation. The two analytical models loosely follow those outlined by Wolfgang Mueller (1997), who traces their development to organizational theory literature. The first, the “Societal Change” approach, theorizes that parties and other political institutions react to new challenges in a largely bottom-up process. In contrast, the “Elite-led” approach views parties as actors who alter their environment in a predominantly top-down process. Specific to women’s access, the Societal Change approach would suggest that pressure generated by the party’s grass roots forced parties to respond by promoting women candidates for office. In contrast, the Elite-led approach suggests that party leaders selected the issue of promoting women candidates in anticipation that these women would benefit the party at the polls.

It is important to note that the two approaches are simplified versions of a compilation of rich theories. Rather than being mutually exclusive alternatives, these two categorizations are designed to act as analytical tools in understanding how existing scholarship has conceptualized party change, and how considering forces from one direction, to the exclusion of the other, severely limits our understanding of political parties. Certainly forces from both the top and the grass roots are necessary for party change, but past accounts often focus on one or the other. Herbert Kitschelt (1994) cogently notes that “both sociological determinism and political voluntarism shun a more complex reconstruction of the relationship between social structure and politics.” Specifically, elite-led forces have often been given short-shrift. Thus, by depicting parties as empty vessels that react to social forces, past research has missed the productive role party elites can play in steering party efforts to promote women candidates.

The Societal Change Approach

Theories that give credence to social forces highlight the fundamental and ultimate role of the electorate. From this perspective, social movements, citizen groups, and party supporters pressure the party to incorporate their issues. The party responds, or does not respond, to those challenges at its own peril. From this perspective, a political party is a set of institutions that reflect changes in the environment, rather than controlling that environment (Katz and Mair, 1992).

The seminal studies of party transformation in the European setting envision change in response to shifts in society. A common theme underpins both Otto Kirchheimer’s (1966) catch-all prophecy and Leon Epstein’s (1967) theory of a “contagion from the right”: the attenuation of links between social groups and parties yields changes in party behavior, most notably a shift toward centrist politics in a race for electoral success. Similarly, in their early
research on the ability of parties to emulate the “responsible parties model,”
Robert Harmel and Kenneth Janda (1982) envisioned party adaptation to new
demands as a process in which changes in broad environmental factors, such
as mass values, influence a party system. Using data on the ideology and
organization of ninety-five parties from 1957 to 1962, Harmel and Janda con-
tend that regarding change and political parties, “causal primacy resides in the
environment.”

Specific to the literature on women’s issues and parties, Christina Wol-
brecht’s (2000) research on the United States finds a similar bottom-up pat-
tern. She concludes that with the rise of the women’s movement, Democrats
and Republicans absorbed and channeled demands from their existing con-
stituencies, causing them to shift their positions on women’s rights. Yet it
should be noted that Wolbrecht does not ignore top-down forces, and her addi-
tion of the role of party elites is described in the following section.

Theories based on social forces provide only a partial understanding by
focusing on how political parties “respond” to changes in mass values and
demands of women activists for greater numerical representation of women.
From the social forces perspective, broad changes in society in terms of
women’s increasing participation in the workforce and higher education fos-
tered changes in public attitudes towards women’s roles. Shifts in aggregate
attitudes toward the role of women in society brought more positive attitudes
toward the role of women in politics more specifically. In addition, the
women’s movement has pressured for women’s representation.

Importantly, by limiting its focus to the role of social forces, past research
has often assumed that women’s gains in parliament are inevitable (albeit
slow) as their roles in society and general attitudes shift over time. Yet the
empirical evidence presented in chapter 1 shows that women’s gains have nei-
ther been incremental, nor automatic, nor widespread. Instead, women make
gains in certain parties at certain points in time. Clearly social forces do not
paint the full picture.

The Elite-led Approach

Theories that emphasize the role of political leaders add the importance of
conscious party efforts, decisions, and strategies in the process of change. In
this top-down process, new issues often first emerge as struggles between rival
party leaders or factions, and then filter down to the party rank and file. Rather
than simply responding to environmental changes, parties consciously create or
alter the environment in which they compete. In other words, social forces are
neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for party change (Mueller,
1997). As Sheri Berman cogently writes, “while exogenous socioeconomic and
cultural changes may . . . force parties to confront a distinct set of challenges, they do not determine how parties will actually respond to those challenges” (105).

This perspective on party change stems from the seminal works of Downs (1957) and Riker (1965), who both view political actors as rational decision makers who calculate the consequences of their acts and pursue their own self-interests. Riker (1965) theorizes that the party (or parties) out of power always has the incentive to improve its situation by breaking the status quo, and the most effective method is to bring new cross-cutting issues onto the political agenda. Thus, the party leadership itself initiates change, marketing its new ideas to the electorate.

The elite perspective on the process of adaptation is most evident in the work of Edward Carmines and James Stimson (1989), who reason that many issues compete for recognition, and those that become salient are promoted by strategic politicians. Then, the electorate responds to some issues and not to others, analogous to natural selection in the biological world. Relying on measures of party positions derived from party platforms, presidential stances, and congressional votes, Carmines and Stimson find that the change in popular perceptions of party position on the racial issue registered only after the party elites had polarized on the racial issue. In short, division among elites (although likely based upon projected electoral concerns) led to a change in the mass perceptions of party positions, which in turn led to a new alignment among voters. Carmines and Stimson assume citizens are neither sufficiently informed nor sufficiently involved to change parties. Instead, political elites mobilize the mass public on a new issue in order to increase their power.

Thus, the Elite-led approach begins with the premise that if all parties in a system are presented with the same challenges and demands, then internal party dynamics may explain why parties respond differently. The incentive for the established party to change may not be based upon a party’s composition of voters, as suggested by the Social Change approach, but rather the established party’s anticipation that to win new votes, it must target a new group of voters. I argue that neither changes among the electorate nor losses in votes alone spur parties to make changes; the critical element in change is the shifting priority of those votes to party leaders. I will show that in certain contexts, increases in women’s parliamentary presence occurred after party leaders anticipated that women’s votes could be won by selecting more women candidates. Where party leaders recognized the potential for gender issues to provide new bases of voter support, and/or to provide new bases of political appeal, they pressed for policies to offer more female candidates. And where the political and institutional opportunities allowed, these party elites then decisively altered their environment, resulting in elevated numbers of women candidates and women MPs.
A Theory of Party Inclusion of New Groups

Party theory gains a new perspective when it goes beyond identifying the dominant sources for change to look at the way those pressures interact with the opportunity structure. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate that party change occurs in both a bottom-up and a top-down process within parties. Importantly, the process is conditioned by the rules and balance of power within which the party is embedded. Bottom-up efforts alone are effective only in a particular context, and top-down party efforts are an essential addition in others. Key political opportunity structures and forces for change suggest a sequence of influences as shown in figure 2.1. Forces operating outside the party, such as growing electoral support for women’s equality at the mass level, underpin the rise of new issues to the political agenda. Shifts in voting patterns leave parties searching for new bases of support. Grassroots pressure within the party for the inclusion of a group representing this new issue often comes through an existing ancillary organization, which effectively becomes an intraparty interest group. Rising from within this interest group, members climb to higher positions within the general party structure. Ascension to the top leadership is facilitated by the political opportunity structure. Changes are most likely during internal party upheavals where the party faces increasing electoral uncertainty, heated competition from an entrepreneurial party, and/or declining support based on traditionally reliable voting blocs. Elite turnover is more likely under certain internal institutional opportunity structures, as well. Parties with many disparate factions and interest groups in the first place provide more points of access and norms of inclusion. In addition, parties that are less rule-bound and ideologically rigid find it easier to accommodate new interests. Further, where the new groups’ claims fit in with existing party ideology, change is facilitated.

A partial replacement of party elites translates into a shift of power within the party. At this point, top-down party forces exert pressure as well. Elite replacement infuses the party with innovative ideas. Entrenched party elites

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**Figure 2.1** Sequence of Influences in Party Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exogenous to Party</th>
<th>Endogenous to Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Growing Support at Mass Level</td>
<td>Intraparty Interest Group Pressure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
may also come to see their interests in a new light when effectively lobbied by internal interest groups.

Finally, a reorganized party leadership most likely makes new policies to reinforce its power. Party rule changes and efforts to promote the descriptive representation of new challengers are most likely in a flexible, pragmatic, open party structure. Likewise, in a centralized party, the leadership has the ability to make and enforce the new rules, even if local party organizations are reluctant to upset entrenched power holders.

Finding Access in Political Parties

The flow chart in figure 2.1 depicted inclusion from the perspective of the party, and this model also offers some practical strategies for how new contenders, such as women, or even environmental interests or ethnic minorities, might best find access in a party system, and how institutions shape these choices. As activists challenge the political system for presence in decision making, they often meet barriers presented by entrenched interests and institutions. Where new contenders do not make automatic gains as a result of changing social environments, they can take concrete claims to political parties. By entering party politics, these new contenders translate informal movement tactics and demands to more formal and institutionalized intraparty interest group lobbying. Overall, most effective strategy within parties resembles the chart shown in figure 2.2. First, the most facilitative opportunity structure is one in which the party’s existing ideological orientation matches up with that of the new challenger. New groups do best to take their demands to the more sympathetic parties. In the case of women, minorities, or environmental interests, parties that already hold some New Left values are the best targets. Parties that lean more toward Old Left politics of class struggle may still share the closest relationships with labor groups, and new issues subordinated to the old dominant economic issues.

Still, new challengers may favor a variety of different parties across the ideological spectrum, and parties have many other structures that make them

Figure 2.2 Effective Strategy for Party Change

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Align w/ Dominant Party Coalition  ➔  Break Top Party Ranks  ➔  Change in Leaders’ Perception  ➔  Change in Party Norms  ➔  Change in Party Policy  ➔  Group Gains
more or less permeable to new challengers. Parties guided by an overall ethos toward relying on various interest groups will be more amenable to new group demands. And a centralized leadership creates a central target at which the new group can aim its demands. This structure minimizes the number of levels at which the group will have to lobby, thus concentrating the full force of their demands in one place, and holding those central authorities accountable if their demands are not met.

To begin to make inroads, a new group’s best strategy is to align with the dominant faction within the party, rather than the out-groups. This strategy may mean a trade-off toward more pragmatic claims for organizational advancement. Forging ties with the dominant faction is especially important in a centralized party structure, where the party leadership has the power and control to meet the new group’s demands.

To move toward the end goal of parliamentary seats, it is key for the new group to break the top party ranks, thus reorganizing the traditional power structure. By gaining new positions of power, new challengers also gain the ear of party leaders. By strategically framing their claims, these new party elites can often change entrenched leaders’ perceptions of the need to offer new contenders among the party’s slate of candidates. This approach is most likely in an environment of electoral instability or heated competition in the party system. The new contenders within the party can pitch their claims for greater power in terms of winning the support of the larger group they represent, as a symbol of the party’s commitment. By placing claims within a vote-getting strategy, the new contenders can take advantage of the opportunities provided by outside forces.

Once a few token newcomers have gained power within the party, it is imperative that they pressure for active measures and formal rule changes that favor them. That is, new challengers seek to reinforce their gains on party decision-making bodies with some internal quotas. Positive action strategies such as quotas are most likely to gain support in parties with an ideological tradition supportive of proactive remedies for structural injustices. Often, leftist parties are more amenable to quotas than their rightist counterparts, who eschew preferential policies of any form. Further, centralized parties find it easier to implement such rules. Once internal quotas further increase the challengers’ power inside the party, challengers press for candidate-level quotas. Candidate quotas work best in PR systems, where party lists can be balanced to reflect both new and entrenched office seekers.

**Mechanisms for Increasing Women’s Parliamentary Gains**

Specific to women’s inclusion, several mechanisms work together to increase
the proportion of women in a party’s delegation to parliament. The main mechanisms are depicted in figure 2.3. These mechanisms are conditioned by opportunity structure variables. For the clarity of presentation, some of these structures are not shown in the figure and will be added to the discussion. Together, these pressures and structures suggest a sequence of events. The broader and more indirect influences, which are exogenous to political parties, are depicted down the left side of the figure. While not the focal point of this book, the processes of societal transformations, pressure for reform from the women’s movement, and changes in mass attitudes toward women’s roles in society and political life are certainly essential to sparking pressure for greater representation in party politics. As discussed in chapter 1, broad social transformations such as women’s increasing levels of higher education, paid
employment, and entrance into elite occupations combined to create a pool of politically aware women. These changes and growing concern for women's oppression are represented by the women's movement, which increasingly concentrated on mainstream political channels throughout this period. Pressures generated from this movement sustain demands on the party to increase women's voice in the democratic process. Certainly the demands and strategies of the national women's movement condition women's entrance into party politics.

In a particular context, where there are few barriers to women seeking election, these social forces bring women substantial gains in parliamentary seats. Yet in most cases, social forces are necessary but not sufficient. In the past, many parties effectively blocked some women's election to office, especially in single-member districts where entrenched males proved a safer bet, or in closed-list PR systems by placing women at the bottom of party lists, where they had little chance of being elected, except in an unexpected landslide. However, where proportional systems allow for preferential voting through an open list, parties can provide balanced lists without threatening entrenched office holders, and voters can cast their ballots for women if they wish. Under these circumstances, direct appeals to the electorate to increase women's parliamentary representation can be effective. Few countries use open lists, so women's candidacies are most often in the hands of the party gatekeepers.

Women's concerted efforts to lobby from within political parties are most often an essential addition. At the bottom right-hand side of the flow chart in figure 2.3, I highlight the importance of party grassroots forces. First, the party women's organization is a key access point for women as a group. Though traditionally designed to recruit new female members, the women's organization provides a ready-made infrastructure for new demands for women's presence among the party leadership and in parliament. In addition, the women's organization holds an available pool of party women for leadership spots when they open up, and growing electoral support among women voters pressures parties to run female candidates. As class-based voting declined, opportunities arose as parties looked to draw support from new voting blocs, and women can become a more important electoral asset.

Party efforts from the top down often bring significant gains, which are depicted at the top right-hand corner of figure 2.3. Women's presence among the party leadership is the single most important mechanism for initiating women's gains in parliament. Of course, these first women must be willing to "let the ladder down" to other women within the party. In a top-led fashion, increasing numbers of women among the party's highest ranks heighten women's power and resources to gain parliamentary representation. Within the party, this reorganization of power is crucial in terms of breaking up the historically male-dominated party leadership circles.
Particular institutional opportunity structures facilitate women’s rise from supporters and activists to leadership positions. A more factionalized, interest-group-oriented party structure facilitates this bottom-up pressure from the party women’s organization. Further, a more flexible party may adopt internal party gender quotas in an effort to appease female party activists who seek higher positions. And these quotas are much more likely in a party with some New Left values that are already sympathetic to women’s inequality as a structural problem in need of direct remedy.

Adding fuel to the fire, competition across the party system for women’s votes will spur parties to present a more “woman-friendly” image through symbolic representation. Specifically, if an entrepreneurial New Left party sets a gender quota and runs a large number of women for office, the deficiencies of the established parties are magnified, and the issue of gender equality is heightened to greater importance. This sort of competitive pressure represents a shift in the political opportunity structure and highlights the importance of competitive party leaders as agents of change.

With more women in party leadership positions, women gain access to party leaders, and thus they gain the ability to change leaders’ perceptions of the utility of running more women for office. Party leaders are most likely to initiate top-down efforts to promote women candidates when they come to see the electoral benefit from women’s votes.

Women at the top of the party organization have often pressed for party policies to mandate more women candidates in winnable spots. And where these efforts are successful, women gain parliamentary seats. Importantly, women have changed the rules of recruitment in many parties across Western Europe, thereby institutionalizing and ensuring their future gains in office. Again, more flexible parties with leftist values are most likely to adopt gender quotas, and centralized parties can implement new selection rules. Further, candidate gender quotas work best in party-list PR systems, where candidate lists can be balanced. In single-member districts, mandating a “female” seat to the exclusion of all males is often seen as discriminatory and a threat to local party autonomy.

Conclusions

This chapter provides a conceptual map to plot the path on which women are most likely to make the greatest gains through political parties. This is an ideal set of circumstances. In practice, women are unlikely to confront a chain of solely favorable circumstances. Yet by identifying which factors are favorable and which are not, we take a major step toward understanding how women and other new challengers can make gains. Importantly, by tying these forces
together, it is possible to identify the way strategies interact with structures. The following chapters will test this framework for party change and women’s access, both systematically with party-level statistics, and in-depth with some critical case study comparison.