

Why Women? The Impact of Women in Elective Office

The presence of women in elective office pales in comparison to their presence in the U.S. population. Although several records have been set for women's officeholding in the past decade, women are just 19.4% of members of Congress.¹ Women typically fare better in state legislatures, but even there women only hold 24.2% of seats.² The scarcity of elected women is even more dramatic when one considers the gender imbalance of elected officials since the nation's founding.³ Had more women held office throughout U.S. history, would the country look different today? We can only speculate about what our laws and public policies might look like if American government had been more inclusive over the course of its history.

But what we can determine—through research—is the impact that the women who have served in elective office have had on American politics. Scholars have used a variety of techniques—from interviews and case studies to surveys and statistical analysis—to assess the impact of women in public office. Although the findings are complex, a growing body of evidence shows that gender is an important factor in legislative behavior.

GENDER AND LEGISLATIVE BEHAVIOR

The most striking research finding about how women and men legislate concerns their legislative priorities. Studies of both state legislatures and Congress find that legislation on issues of particular importance to women was more likely to be introduced by women than by men. At the critical agenda-setting or bill-introduction stage, legislators choose from among countless pressing social, economic, and political issues. Legislators make difficult decisions about which policies merit their time and energy, and women and men typically make different choices about those priorities.

Women are more likely to make bills dealing with women's issues and children and family issues a priority

For example, in a foundational study using a mail survey of legislators in twelve states in 1988, Sue Thomas found that women were more likely to make bills dealing with women's issues and children and family issues a priority.⁴ Similarly, national studies of state legislators conducted by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) in 1988 and 2001 using phone interviews reveal that women legislators were more likely than their male colleagues to list a women's rights bill or a bill affecting children and families as a top priority.⁵ A study of Colorado state legislators in 1989 revealed gender differences in the conceptualization of public policy problems—with crime the focus of the study—and consequently, different policy solutions.⁶ Research on Congress also finds a different issue emphasis by gender. Michele Swers, for example, found that women were more likely to sponsor women's issues bills in both the 103rd and 104th Congresses.⁷

The electoral constraints facing women legislators can also shape what issues are pursued and how they are pursued. For example, Swers shows that in Congress, women senators use their legislative work to combat the stereotype among voters that they are less capable than men of handling military and national security issues.⁸

Women's distinctive legislative priorities are understandable given gender differences in life experiences—ranging from differences in educational and occupational background to differences in caregiving experiences and experiences with gender inequality and

Why Women? The Impact of Women in Elective Office

discrimination. Physical differences, as well, can make policy issues related to women's health and reproduction more salient to women legislators. Women's desire to represent women can also arise if women—once they enter the legislature—believe that issues of disproportionate interest to women are not being addressed.⁹ CAWP's congressional interviews also show that it is common for congresswomen to consider how legislation will affect women throughout the country, beyond the boundaries of the districts they represent; they see themselves as "surrogate representatives" for women throughout the United States.¹⁰

Most women legislators also believe that women have increased the extent to which the business of the legislature is conducted in public, as opposed to behind closed doors

CAWP surveys of women state legislators reveal that women legislators have close ties to women's organizations—much more so than do their male counterparts.¹¹ The connections of women legislators to women's organizations cross party lines.¹² These connections between women legislators and women's organizations help to give women in office a "collective vision of women's interests" that facilitates women's representation, according to Susan J. Carroll.¹³ Both women and men in the legislatures believe that women legislators have increased legislative attention to how bills will affect women, and that women have increased political access for economically disadvantaged groups.¹⁴ Most women legislators also believe that women have increased the extent to which the business of the legislature is conducted in public, as opposed to behind closed doors.¹⁵

A growing number of studies focus on the intersection

of gender with race. This path-breaking research about the interaction of race and gender identities finds compelling evidence that women of color champion a legislative agenda that combines issues traditionally associated with women as a group and issues historically important to communities of color.¹⁶ For example, African American women state legislators have been found to be distinctive from other legislators in their focus on women's interests and African American interests.¹⁷ A similar pattern is emerging for Latinas in state legislatures.¹⁸ And while there is good reason to be concerned about the status and influence of all women legislators, women of color are arguably favorably positioned to appeal to a broader coalition due to their gender and race identities; women of color are not necessarily disadvantaged.¹⁹ Importantly, Reingold and Haynie show that women of color state legislators are no less committed than white women to women's substantive representation.²⁰

New research by Nadia Brown argues for the use of the term "race-gender identity" to better capture the intersectional experiences that African American women bring to their legislative work. Moreover, although Brown finds that African American women legislators find agreement on issues affecting African American women as a group, she also finds that other identities—such as parental status and sexual orientation—matter as well.

Studies have found a wide range of gender differences in legislative behavior beyond policy priorities, though the findings tend to be more variable across studies and the size of gender differences is usually narrower. For example, in an exhaustive study of all stages of the legislative process across two Congresses—the 103rd and 104th—Swers finds gender differences in virtually every aspect of behavior in the U.S. House of Representatives, even in the face of powerful statistical controls.²¹ But some of the largest gender effects in her analysis occur in agenda-setting.

Why Women? The Impact of Women in Elective Office

Some advocates of increasing women's presence in elective office argue that women must constitute a "critical mass" of legislators—sometimes described as 25% to 35%—in order for women to overcome their minority status in the legislature and advocate for women as a group. However, most studies do not support the idea that gender differences in legislative behavior suddenly emerge once a specific threshold has been reached.²² The watershed years for the expansion of women's rights by Congress in the early 1970s occurred when very few women served—far from a critical mass. The women who did serve in Congress played key roles at crucial moments on major pieces of women's rights legislation.²³ Even a small number of women legislators can make a difference.²⁴ Case studies of congressional policymaking likewise reveal the role that women legislators play throughout the

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process—and often behind closed doors—in promoting issues important to women and in encouraging attention to the gendered impact of all policies.²⁵ Kristin Kanthak and George A. Krause emphasize the interaction of numbers with a strategy of coordination among women legislators, finding that women's situation improves in state legislatures when they form a women's caucus.²⁶

Interestingly, women members of Congress are more likely to employ women as members of their staffs.²⁷ However, women members are not more likely to employ women in the most senior staff positions.

A number of factors may explain why scholars have not found even larger gender differences among legislators. Legislators can be analyzed in other ways, beyond the category of gender. Women hail from different racial, ethnic, religious, and occupational backgrounds. They bring different ideological perspectives to their jobs as legislators and represent different types of constituents from across the country. Thus, as Susan J. Carroll observes, "Even when women members of Congress act in ways that they perceive as representing women, their actions may not always look the same."²⁸

It can be challenging for scholars to isolate the impact of women legislators. For example, if women legislators influence the priorities of the legislature as a whole—including men legislators—then the influence of women may be hard to detect. Should men follow women's lead and act for women, too, differences between women and men legislators would be less evident.²⁹

CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN LEGISLATORS

Because women have historically been underrepresented within legislatures, legislatures may not always be the most welcoming institutions.³⁰ Interview and survey evidence reveal the challenges that women legislators too often face because of gender dynamics within the legislature, as well as the interaction of racial and gender difference.³¹ While most women believe they have access to leadership and are consulted within their institutions, a substantial proportion of women state legislators surveyed nationally by CAWP in 2001 do not. In the survey, 42% of women legislators disagreed with the statement that "Most men in my legislature are supportive of moving women into leadership positions"; a similar percentage disagreed with the statement that "The leaders in my legislature are as likely to consult with the women in the legislature as the men when making important decisions."³²

Experimental research about deliberative democracy

Why Women? The Impact of Women in Elective Office

also sheds light on when and whether women's voices are heard in male-dominated settings. In a new laboratory study about citizen deliberation in small groups, Karpowitz et al. find that the gender composition of the group is consequential for how much women speak, although the results depend on the type of rule governing decision making.³³ They find that women's equal participation in decision making depends on either having an all-female or female-majority group, or on having a unanimous decision-making rule that ensures women's voices will be heard even if they are a minority in the group.

These authors also find that women's substantive representation—measured in the study by the small group reaching a decision that is more helpful to the poor—is more likely to occur when women constitute the majority of a small group and majority rule governs the decision making.³⁴ The authors show that whether women introduce “care” issues into the debate depends on the share of women in the group, as well as the rule governing deliberations. In short, women's voices can be easily marginalized in deliberations—particularly if they comprise a minority of group members.

Unfortunately, the distinctive issues that women members champion within Congress are less likely to find success than the issues championed by men in Congress.³⁵ This finding, which holds in a multivariate analysis, may emerge because women have traditionally been underrepresented in Congress and are bringing new issues to the table. The authors of the study see their results as an indication that more women need to win election to Congress and achieve seniority in order to pursue their distinctive policy agenda.

In a state legislative study, Dana E. Wittmer and Vanessa Bouche find that bills on human trafficking that attracted greater female sponsorship are less likely to find success than other bills.³⁶ This conclusion raises questions about the prospects for success when women legislators pursue issues collectively as women.

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PARTY DIFFERENCES AMONG WOMEN

Among the various factors that might make cooperation among women more or less likely, perhaps none is more important than party. Being an effective legislator may depend on cooperation with party leaders and support for the party's agenda.³⁷ The extent to which women serving in Congress share a common view of women's interests depends, in part, on which women are serving in a given congressional session. For example, the election of a new group of conservative Republican women in the 104th Congress made for very different relationships among women of the two parties compared with the previous Congress.³⁸ In an extensive study of gender and party effects across state legislatures, Tracy Osborn finds that Democratic and Republican women state legislators bring very different viewpoints to their roles as lawmakers. She argues that the concept of “women's representation” must account for the ways that women legislate through their political parties.³⁹

Typically, studies have shown that women legislators are more liberal than men.⁴⁰ But recent research indicates that ideological differences between male and female lawmakers are narrowing.⁴¹ Danielle Thomsen's analysis of the growing conservatism of Republicans in Congress shows that moderates—including moderate Republican women—have greater difficulty winning election.⁴² Recent Republican congressional candidates do not differ ideologically by gender, suggesting that the difficulties faced by moderates today can partially explain the large gender gap among Republicans in Congress.⁴³ While congresswomen in the U.S. House of Representatives worked together across party lines

Why Women? The Impact of Women in Elective Office

through the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues in the past, it is difficult for today's female House members to find common ground.⁴⁴ As Mary Hawkesworth and her coauthors point out, women's collaboration as legislators is usually the product of political coalition building and may come with political costs.⁴⁵

The growing ideological gulf between the two parties nationally includes women's rights issues. The Democratic party has alleged a "Republican War on Women" in recent election cycles—particularly in response to Republican candidates' campaign gaffes related to abortion and rape.⁴⁶ The two parties' differences on abortion and reproductive rights have become especially prominent as both parties have sought women's votes in what is an increasingly competitive environment. The increasing polarization of the two parties nationally makes cooperation across party lines more difficult, including cooperation on the basis of gender.

In the U.S. Senate, however, women from the two parties continue to meet informally for dinner once a month—a feat in today's partisan climate. While most previous research has focused on the House, the greater number of women serving in the Senate in recent years has made possible new research opportunities for studying women's lawmaking. Swers finds significant gender differences in sponsorship and co-sponsorship of women's issues legislation in the Senate, particularly on feminist bills.⁴⁷ The desire to represent women characterizes the orientations of both Republican and Democratic women. However, she also finds through case studies that Democratic and Republican women view women's issues differently. Democratic women senators are working together within their caucus on women's rights issues such as reproductive rights and equal pay, standing apart from both the men in their

caucus and their Republican women colleagues. The Democratic women senators also have shown a deep commitment to feminist issues that extends to their work behind the scenes. Meanwhile, Swers shows that moderate Republican women are especially cross-pressured as they try to represent women while also satisfying the needs of their party.

How women wield influence in Congress, and how they are received, may be contingent not only on women's party attachments, but also on their numerical presence within their caucus and their location within the majority or minority party. For example, Kristin Kanthak and George A. Krause find that female House members are less valued in terms of campaign contributions from other colleagues as their presence in the House caucus increases; as women gain seats and become a more sizable minority within the caucus, they are perceived as more threatening to the status quo.⁴⁸

Craig Volden, Alan E. Wiseman and Dana E. Wittmer show that the effectiveness of women lawmakers in the House depends on majority party status.⁴⁹ While women of the minority party outperform men of the minority party in furthering their bills in the legislative process, majority women do not fare better than majority men. The authors attribute this difference to the ability of women in the minority to have more success in building coalitions. Thus, not only party but status in the majority or minority party interacts with gender to shape effectiveness.

In a novel argument, Clark and Caro contend that multi-member districts in Arizona help women to work across party lines, again highlighting the importance of institutional context for understanding how women legislate.⁵⁰

Why Women? The Impact of Women in Elective Office

SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION

One area of research extends beyond the boundaries of legislative institutions to the public. This line of research asks if women's presence in government has a symbolic effect on voters—and particularly women. While some studies have failed to find the hypothesized effects, other studies do find evidence that women legislators make a difference to the country in a general sense. Women in the public, seeing women participating in politics as candidates and elected officials, may feel more included in politics and be more likely to care about politics and participate as a result.

For example, Nancy E. Burns, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Sidney Verba found that women candidates and elected officials closed the traditional gender gap in psychological engagement.⁵¹ More recently, Kim Fridkin and Patrick Kenney find that the gender gap in political knowledge closes in states with women senators and that women are more politically active in those states.⁵² Philip Edward Jones also finds that women are more

likely to know about senators' voting records when the senator is female.⁵³ And using a novel experiment with a national sample, Wittmer finds that gains in women's collective representation could indeed increase women's political participation.⁵⁴

Women are more likely to know about senators' voting records when the senator is female

However, the results of studies by Jennifer Lawless and Kathleen Dolan are less conclusive.⁵⁵ Other studies find effects for symbolic representation, but argue that those effects are conditional.⁵⁶ Although most existing research has usually focused on the effects of women congressional candidates and officeholders, Brookman found that the presence of women state legislative candidates did not increase women voters' political participation.⁵⁷

Future Research Directions

More research is needed on how women experience legislative life, as well as on how women are navigating the contemporary era of partisan polarization and under what conditions they are able to cooperate across party lines. With more women of color holding office than ever before, new studies are needed about how race and gender work within legislative institutions and the factors that can enhance the influence of all women legislators.

Scholars continue to debate whether and how "women's issues" or "women's interests" can be defined and studied.⁵⁸ Some scholars are applying the idea of "claims making" by theorist Michael Saward to women's

legislative activities, which helps to cast a broader net to investigate women's representational acts rather than defining "women's issues" a priori.⁵⁹

If more women are elected to legislative office, more women will be available to serve in both parties and across legislative committees, and more women can seek leadership positions.⁶⁰ And the more women win office, the more likely it is that women legislators can represent the diversity of women's experiences, including those of conservative women.⁶¹ Certainly, the women who have served to date have already left their mark.⁶²

Why Women? The Impact of Women in Elective Office

Further Reading

Swers, Michele L. 2013. *Women in the Club: Gender and Policy Making in the Senate*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

This book investigates the role of gender in the U.S. Senate. Swers examines legislative activity for all members in order to isolate gender differences once other member characteristics are taken into account. She also conducts case studies of multiple policy areas in order to pinpoint the interaction of gender with specific aspects of the policymaking process. She pays special attention to the situation facing women within their political parties, finding that Democratic women are working together to advocate for women. Meanwhile, the situation facing Republican women is more complicated because their goal of representing women is often hindered by the agenda and needs of their party.

Volden, Craig, Alan Wiseman, and Dana Wittmer. 2013. "Women's Issues and Their Fates in Congress." Midwest Political Science Association Annual Conference, Chicago, IL.

This paper takes an innovative approach to answer an enduring question in the literature: how gender is related to legislative behavior and whether women in Congress provide better substantive representation of female constituents. Their novel approach is to develop an endogenous measure of women's issues, defined as those issues that women are more likely to work on than men. Their dataset spans the years 1973 to 2002 and shows that women's issues achieve less success than men's proposals—particularly at the committee stage. This paper identifies the critical importance that the status of women in Congress holds for the advancement of women's issues in the legislative process.

Carroll, Susan J. "Representing Women: Congresswomen's Perceptions of Their Representational Roles." *Women Transforming Congress*. Ed. Cindy Simon Rosenthal. University of Oklahoma Press, 2002. 50-68.

This chapter examines the perspectives of women in Congress based on interviews conducted by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) with women serving in the 103rd and 104th Congresses. Carroll finds that virtually all of the female members of Congress act as "surrogate representatives" for women across the country. The congresswomen see commonalities in the experiences of women and feel an obligation to represent women broadly, even beyond their districts. At the same time, congresswomen's perspectives differ by factors such as district characteristics, party, and race/ethnicity, leading to different approaches to surrogate representation.

Why Women? The Impact of Women in Elective Office

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Why Women? The Impact of Women in Elective Office

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