

Understanding the Policy Impact of Electing Women: Evidence from Research on Congress and State Legislatures

In the 2000 elections, women continued their slow advance into the halls of political power. Today women constitute 13.6% of the House of Representatives, 13% of the Senate, and 22.3% of state legislatures (Center for American Women and Politics 2000). The underrepresentation of women in politics has provoked concern from media commentators, political activists, and feminist scholars who believe that there is a connection between descriptive representation—being a woman—and substantive representation, the advocacy of women's interests (Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995; Pitkin 1967; Sapiro 1981). Predictions of the magnitude of women's impact on the policy process span a wide range. The pressure of frequent elections suggests that all representatives, regardless of gender, will zealously advocate the interests of their constituencies. On the other hand, it

is possible that female legislators will devote special attention to the interests of women, children, and families. Additionally, women may exhibit a different style of leadership that

will have consequences for the very process by which public policy is made. In this essay, I review the evidence concerning the nature of the policy impact of electing women and I suggest directions for future research.

by
Michele Swers,
Mary Washington College

Women in the State Legislatures: A Substantive Impact

Scholars interested in determining the influence of women on the policy process originally focused their attention on the individual states because more women have served in the state legislatures than in Congress. The evidence from these studies demonstrates that women serving in the state legislatures exhibit unique policy priorities, particularly in the area of women's issues.¹ In multistate analyses and longitudinal studies of single legislatures, scholars have found that in comparison to men, female legislators are more liberal in their policy attitudes and they exhibit a greater commitment to the pursuit of feminist initiatives and legislation incorporating issues of traditional

concern to women, including education, health, and welfare (Berkman and O'Connor 1993; Dodson and Carroll 1991; Dolan and Ford 1995; Saint-Germain 1989; Thomas 1994). Women are also more likely to see their women's issue proposals passed into law (Saint-Germain 1989; Thomas 1994). In addition to differences in policy behavior, researchers found that women display a unique view of their representational role. Female legislators expressed a sense of responsibility to represent the interests of women and they were more likely than men to view women as a distinct part of their constituencies (Reingold 1992; Thomas 1994, 1997). Some scholars maintain that women exhibit a distinctive way of thinking about policy problems. For example, in her analysis of crime policy, Kathlene (1995) notes that women favored rehabilitative initiatives while men preferred proposals concerning punishment.

By examining legislative behavior across time and in different states, scholars found that the sex differences in the policy priorities of legislators intensified as the proportion of women in the legislature approached a "critical mass" (Berkman and O'Connor 1993; Saint-Germain 1989; Thomas 1994). Drawing on the theories of Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) concerning the impact of proportions on groups, these researchers noted that as women increase their numbers in the legislature, they are more willing to pursue policy preferences based on gender.² Additionally, Thomas (1994) and Saint-Germain (1989) maintain that the presence of a women's caucus provides women with additional resources beyond their numbers, thus reducing the negative effects of tokenism.

The Policy Influence of Women in Congress

The scarcity of women in Congress before the 1992 "Year of the Woman" election made it difficult to evaluate the policy impact of electing women. The first systematic efforts to analyze sex differences in the legislative activities of members of Congress focused on roll-call voting behavior (Gehlen 1977; Leader 1977; Frankovic 1977). Over time, studies examining whether women are more liberal than their male colleagues have had mixed

results (Burrell 1994; Frankovic 1977; Gehlen 1977; Leader 1977; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 1997; Welch 1985). However, other research indicates that gender exerts a significant effect on voting for specific gender-related concerns such as abortion (Tatolovich and Schier 1993) or a set of women's issues (Burrell 1994; Dolan 1997; Swers 1998).

Yet analyses of roll-call voting only scratch the surface of potential gender differences in legislative participation, since the position a legislator takes on a roll-call vote does not reveal the depth of the member's commitment to women's interests, nor does it indicate the process by which a bill advanced through the legislative process (Hall 1996; Swers 2000). Beginning in the early 1990s, scholarly efforts to examine women's influence on the entire legislative process demonstrate that like their counterparts in the state legislatures, women in Congress have had a unique influence on the congressional policymaking process, particularly in the area of women's issues. Congresswomen are opening the national agenda to gender-related concerns by sponsoring and cosponsoring more legislation concerning feminist issues and issues that reflect women's traditional role as caregiver than their male colleagues do (Swers 2000, forthcoming; Tamerius 1995; Vega and Firestone 1995; Wolbrecht forthcoming). Congresswomen use their committee positions to advocate for the incorporation of women's interests into committee legislation (Dodson 1998, forthcoming; Dodson et al. 1995; Gertzog 1995; Norton forthcoming; Swers 2000, forthcoming). Female legislators also demonstrate higher rates of participation in floor debates on women's issues (Cramer Walsh forthcoming; Swers 2000; Tamerius 1995) and speak with a distinctive voice on these issues (Cramer Walsh forthcoming; Dodson et al. 1995; Levy, Tien, and Aved 2001; Swers 2000). Finally, Congresswomen view women as a distinct portion of their constituencies and they express a commitment to representing women's interests in their legislative activities (Carroll forthcoming; Dodson et al. 1995; Foerstel and Foerstel 1996; Gertzog 1995).

Clearly, the research on the policy impact of female officeholders at the state and national levels has revealed important differences in the legislative priorities of individual legislators. Additionally, the research on state legislatures highlights the influence of the proportion of women in the legislative body and the presence of a women's caucus on a legislator's ability to express unique preferences based on gender. However, scholars need to devote more attention to the ways in which political and institutional contexts shape the decision calculus of legislators concerning what policies to pursue. A new frontier of research seeks to illuminate how institutional and political context factors—such as a member's position within the committee structure and the agenda of the majority party in the legislature—shape the range of choices available to members regardless of their abstract policy preferences (for example, Dodson et al. 1995; Norton 1994; Rosenthal 1998; Swers 2000).

The Relationship of Women to the Institution

The new institutional research highlights the ways in which women are adapting to legislative norms as well as the ways in which institutional and political contexts may inhibit legislators' efforts to advance their policy priorities. For example, Dodson (1995, 1998, forthcoming)

demonstrates how Democratic and Republican women in the 103rd Congress used their positions on key committees and within the party leadership to make certain that legislation concerning violence against women, reproductive rights, and women's health gained a place on the national agenda. Furthermore, these congresswomen ensured that female-centric legislation did not fall victim to issues of time and funding on the way to becoming law. By contrast, in her work on congressional action on reproductive issues, Norton (1994, 1995, 1999, forthcoming) reports that between 1969 and 1992, the members of key committees and subcommittees were able to impose their preferences on reproductive policy despite the will of the majority in Congress. The absence of women from these key committees inhibited women's efforts to change policy regardless of their commitment to pro-choice initiatives. Similarly, Berkman and O'Connor (1993) maintain that state legislative committees with higher percentages of Democratic women were the most successful in blocking anti-abortion legislation. Demonstrating the importance of political context and majority vs. minority party status, Swers (2000, forthcoming) found that moderate Republican women changed their bill sponsorship patterns between the 103rd and 104th congresses, as they increased their sponsorship of social welfare bills and decreased their advocacy of more controversial feminist proposals in order to capitalize on their majority power and avoid antagonizing important party constituencies, particularly social conservatives. This new institutional research indicates that we must further investigate how both the positions of members within the institution and the changes in the external political environment alter the priorities of legislators in ways that we cannot discern by surveying their abstract policy preferences.

Beyond investigating the impact of institutional factors on the ability of members to pursue their policy priorities, scholars are also examining whether women are transforming the nature of the institutions in which they serve. These scholars start from the premise that institutions are gendered, meaning, "gender is present in the processes, practices, images, and ideologies, and distributions of power in the various sectors of social life" (Acker as quoted in Kenney 1996). Thus, male behavior is regarded as the norm in legislative institutions and women feel pressure to adapt to those expectations (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995; Kelly and Duerst-Lahti 1995; Kenney 1996; Rosenthal 1998; Thomas 1997). Research on male-female differences in leadership style demonstrates that women exhibit an alternative method of leadership, which is challenges institutional norms. For example, Rosenthal (1997, 1998, 2000) finds that female committee chairs exhibited a more integrative leadership style than their male counterparts. As a result of gender-role socialization and women's distinctive paths to leadership, the integrative style of female chairs emphasizes consensual, cooperative, and inclusive decision making rather than the transactional and competitive bargaining styles employed by their male colleagues. Similarly, in her analysis of crime legislation, Kathlene (1995) found that women focused more on community-based solutions such as prevention and rehabilitation, while men concentrated on abstract rights and expanding punishment.

Since women's integrative leadership style challenges established masculine legislative norms, women cannot easily incorporate this alternative style in all institutional

settings. For example, Rosenthal (1998) found that integrative leadership behavior is less likely to occur in the more professionalized legislatures in which legislating is a full time job and members have access to staff to develop policy expertise. She also notes that more states are trending toward the model of the professional legislature in which both male and female legislators eschew an inclusive, collaborative leadership style in favor of a more competitive model of leadership. Additionally, Kathlene (1994) reports that in committee hearings in the Colorado legislature, women entered the debate later, spoke less often than their male colleagues did, and interrupted witnesses less frequently than male legislators did. The aggressive behavior of men in committee hearings actually increased as the number of women in the committee room rose. This tension between the new methods of leadership introduced by women and the established institutional norms demonstrates that political activists cannot assume that increasing the number of women in office will lead to reform of the political process.

Directions for Future Research

The existing research on women in Congress and state legislatures has greatly expanded our understanding of women's experiences as legislators. Clearly, female legislators perceive women as a distinct part of their

constituencies and they bring different policy priorities to the legislative agenda, particularly in the area of women's issues. Future research must investigate the ways in which female legislators incorporate women's interests into policy discussions in areas that are not readily identified as women's issues. Scholars should also examine whether the increasing presence of female officeholders is influencing the policy priorities of male representatives. Additionally, we must devote more attention to the intersections of race and gender (Barrett 1995; Darling 1998). How does being an African-American or a Hispanic woman influence a legislator's policy priorities and her relationship with white female legislators, white male legislators, and male legislators of her own race?

Finally, scholars must devote more attention to the influence of institutional and political contexts on the legislative activity of members. A focus on institutions allows us to move beyond legislators' testimony concerning their policy interests to an understanding of how members' positions within the institution shape their willingness to pursue policy preferences based on gender. Future research on institutions must also more carefully delineate the ways in which institutions are gendered and how these hidden norms influence the behavior of male and female legislators. Thus, we need more research to expand our understanding of the ways in which gender considerations mediate the experience of women as officeholders.

Notes

1. The findings concerning the policy impact of women in state legislatures are based on studies of female legislators in the 1980s and 1990s. In her review of studies of female legislators serving in the 1970s, Thomas (1994) reports that these women had more liberal policy attitudes and voting records than did their male colleagues, particularly on feminist issues. However, they did not exhibit different policy priorities in their legislative activity. Additionally, these women focused more on constituency service than policy development and they perceived themselves as less effective than their male colleagues

in the legislative arena. See also Diamond (1977), Kirkpatrick (1974), and Johnson et al. (1978).

2. In her study of skewed groups, Kanter (1977) found that the more numerous "dominants" set organizational norms and treat members of the minority as "tokens" who represent their category as symbols rather than as individuals. Minorities do not escape the constraints of tokenism until the groups become "balanced" at approximately 35%.

References

- Barrett, Edith. 1995. "The Policy Priorities of African-American Women in State Legislatures." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 20:223-47.
- Berkman, Michael B. and Robert E. O'Connor. 1993. "Do Women Legislators Matter?"
- Female Legislators and State Abortion Policy." *American Politics Quarterly* 21:102-24.
- Burrell, Barbara C. 1994. *A Woman's Place is in the House: Campaigning for Congress in the Feminist Era*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Carroll, Susan J. Forthcoming. "Representing Women: Congresswomen's Perception of Their Representational Roles." In *Women Transforming Congress*, ed. Cindy Simon Rosenthal. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Center for American Women and Politics. 2000. "Election 2000: Summary of Results for Women." New Brunswick: Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.
- Cramer Walsh, Katherine. Forthcoming. "Resonating To Be Heard: Gendered Debate On The Floor Of The House." In *Women Transforming Congress*, ed. Cindy Simon Rosenthal. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Darling, Marsha L. 1998. "African-American Women in State Elective Office in the South." In *Women and Elective Office: Past, Present, and Future*, eds. Sue Thomas and Clyde Wilcox. New York: Oxford University Press
- Diamond, Irene. 1977. *Sex Roles in the State House*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Dodson, Debra L. 1998. "Representing Women's Interests in the U.S. House of Representatives." In *Women and Elective Office: Past, Present, and Future*, eds. Sue Thomas and Clyde Wilcox. New York: Oxford University Press
- . Forthcoming. "Representation, Gender and Reproductive Rights in the U.S. Congress." In *Women Transforming Congress*, ed. Cindy Simon Rosenthal. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- , and Susan Carroll. 1991. *Reshaping the Agenda: Women in State Legislatures*. New Brunswick: Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.
- Dodson, Debra L., et al. 1995. *Voices, Views, Votes: The Impact of Women in the 103rd Congress*. New Brunswick: Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.
- Dolan, Julie. 1997. "Support for Women's Interests in the 103rd Congress: The Distinct Impact of Congressional Women." *Women & Politics* 18:81-94.
- Dolan, Kathleen and Lynn Ford. 1995. "Women In The State Legislatures: Feminist Identity and Legislative Behaviors." *American Politics Quarterly* 23:96-108.
- Duerst-Lahti, Georgia and Rita Mae Kelly. 1995. "On Governance, Leadership, and Gender." In *Gender Power, Leadership, and Governance*, eds. Georgia Duerst-Lahti and Rita Mae Kelly. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Foerstel, Karen and Herbert Foerstel. 1996. *Climbing the Hill: Gender Conflict in Congress*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

- Frankovic, Kathleen A. 1977. "Sex and Voting in the U.S. House of Representatives 1961-1975." *American Politics Quarterly* 5:315-330.
- Gehlen, Freida. 1977. "Women Members of Congress: A Distinctive Role." In *A Portrait of Marginality: The Political Behavior of the American Woman*, eds. Marianne Githens and Jewell Prestage. New York: McKay Co.
- Gertzog, Irwin. 1995. *Congressional Women: Their Recruitment, Integration, and Behavior*. Second edition. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Hall, Richard. 1996. *Participation in Congress*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Johnson, Marilyn, and Susan Carroll, with Kathy Stanwyck and Lynn Korenblit. 1978. *Profile of Women Holding Office II*. New Brunswick: Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.
- Kanter, Rosabeth Moss. 1977. "Some Effects of Proportions on Group Life: Skewed Sex Ratios and Responses to Token Women." *American Journal of Sociology* 82:965-90.
- Kathlene, Lyn. 1994. "Power and Influence of State Legislative Policymaking: The Interaction of Gender and Position in Committee Hearing Debates." *American Political Science Review* 88:560-76.
- . 1995. "Alternative Views of Crime: Legislative Policymaking in Gendered Terms." *Journal of Politics* 57:696-723.
- Kelly, Rita Mae and Georgia Duerst-Lahti. 1995. "The Study of Gender Power and Its Link to Governance and Leadership." In *Gender Power, Leadership, and Governance*, eds. Georgia Duerst-Lahti and Rita Mae Kelly. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Kenney, Sally. 1996. "New Research on Gendered Political Institutions." *Political Research Quarterly* 49:445-66.
- Kirkpatrick, Jeane. 1974. *Political Woman*. New York: Basic Books.
- Leader, Shelah Gilbert. 1977. "The Policy Impact of Elected Women Officials." In *The Impact of the Electoral Process*, eds. Joseph Cooper and Louis Maisel. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Levy, Dena, Charles Tien, and Rachelle Aved. Forthcoming. "Do Differences Matter? Women Members of Congress and the Hyde Amendment." *Women & Politics*.
- Mansbridge, Jane. 1999. "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent 'Yes.'" *Journal of Politics* 61:628-57.
- McCarty, Nolan M., Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. 1997. "Income Redistribution and National Politics." Monograph. Washington, D.C.: AEI Press.
- Norton, Noelle H. 1994. "Congressional Committee Power: The Reproductive Policy Inner Circle, 1969-1992." Dissertation Manuscript.
- . 1995. "Women, It's Not Enough to Be Elected: Committee Position Makes a Difference." In *Gender Power, Leadership, and Governance*, eds. Georgia Duerst-Lahti and Rita Mae Kelly. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- . 1999. "Committee Influence Over Controversial Policy: The Reproductive Policy Case." *Policy Studies Journal* 27:203-16.
- . Forthcoming. "'Transforming Congress From The Inside': Women in Committee." In *Women Transforming Congress*, ed. Cindy Simon Rosenthal. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Phillips, Anne. 1995. *The Politics of Presence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. 1967. *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Reingold, Beth. 1992. "Concepts of Representation Among Female and Male State Legislators." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 17:509-37.
- Rosenthal, Cindy Simon. 1997. "A View of Their Own: Women's Committee Leadership Styles and State Legislatures." *Policy Studies Journal* 25:585-600.
- . 1998. *When Women Lead: Integrative Leadership in State Legislatures*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2000. "Gender Styles in State Legislative Committees: Raising Their Voices in Resolving Conflict." *Women & Politics* 21:21-45.
- Saint-Germain, Michelle A. 1989. "Does Their Difference Make a Difference? The Impact of Women on Public Policy in the Arizona Legislature." *Social Science Quarterly* 70:956-68.
- Sapiro, Virginia. 1981. "Research Frontier Essay: When Are Interests Interesting? The Problem of Political Representation of Women." *American Political Science Review* 75:701-16.
- Swers, Michele L. 1998. "Are Congresswomen More Likely to Vote for Women's Issue Bills Than Their Male Colleagues?" *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 23:435-48.
- . 2000. "From the Year of the Woman to the Republican Ascendancy: Evaluating the Policy Impact of Women in Congress." Dissertation Manuscript.
- . Forthcoming. "Transforming the Agenda? Analyzing Gender Differences in Women's Issue Bill Sponsorship." In *Women Transforming Congress*, ed. Cindy Simon Rosenthal. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Tamerius, Karin L. 1995. "Sex, Gender, and Leadership in the Representation of Women." In *Gender Power, Leadership, and Governance*, eds. Georgia Duerst-Lahti and Rita Mae Kelly. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Tatalovich, Raymond and David Schier. 1993. "The Persistence of Ideological Cleavage in Voting on Abortion Legislation in the House of Representatives, 1973-1988." *American Politics Quarterly* 21: 125-39.
- Thomas, Sue. 1994. *How Women Legislate*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 1997. "Why Gender Matters: The Perceptions of Women Officeholders." *Women & Politics* 17:27-53.
- Vega, Arturo and Juanita M. Firestone. 1995. "The Effects of Gender on Congressional Behavior and the Substantive Representation of Women." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 20:213-22.
- Welch, Susan. 1985. "Are Women More Liberal Than Men in the U.S. Congress?" *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 10:125-34.
- Wolbrecht, Christina. Forthcoming. "Female Legislators and the Women's Rights Agenda." In *Women Transforming Congress*, ed. Cindy Simon Rosenthal. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.