

## **Women as Office Holders: Linking Descriptive and Substantive Representation**

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This essay reviews the wealth of research on the behavior, experiences, and accomplishments of women in elective office in the United States to assess what we have learned, and to identify some of the most promising avenues for future research. Motivated in large part by questions and concerns about women's political representation, this research has established a clear, empirical link between women's descriptive and substantive representation. Throughout the policymaking process—and beyond—female officeholders are often more likely than their male colleagues to act for women or women's interests. A closer look at this research also reveals that these links are by no means guaranteed or absolute; descriptive representation is neither absolutely necessary nor entirely sufficient for substantive representation to occur. Some female officeholders are more likely than others to act for women; some male politicians are more likely than others to do so; some governing institutions are more likely than others to do so. Researchers are just beginning to ask why. Future research, I argue, needs to recognize and explore the complex and contingent processes by which the linkages between the descriptive and substantive representation of women are strengthened or weakened. More specifically, this essay recommends that researchers pay more attention to numerous factors besides the gender identity of individual politicians that may promote or inhibit women's substantive representation, including: other dimensions of social identity and location, such as race and ethnicity; as well as institutional and political opportunity structures.

While I have attempted to include as much of the extant research literature as possible, the scope of the analysis is necessarily limited in several ways. First, to maintain some theoretical coherence and to use my time and space most efficiently, I have limited the analysis to *elected* officials only. Thus, the very interesting research on women's representation in public administration is (for now, at least) regrettably neglected (see, for example: Borrelli and Martin

1997; Borrelli 2002; Dolan 2000, 2001, 2002; Keiser et al. 2002; McGlen and Reid Sarkees 1993; Meier and Nigro 1976; Selden 1997). Second, I rely very heavily on research concerning state legislators and members of Congress, for that is where the lion's share of attention has been focused. Very little research has examined the behavior and impact of women in local office (e.g., mayors, city council members, school board members, county commissioners, etc.). Until recently, even, there was not much research available on women in Congress either. Yet the insights gained from that recent research on Congress have been invaluable. No doubt, more research on women in local office could make similar contributions to the subfield. Finally, to maintain the focus on questions about women's substantive representation, I omit much of the more biographical research that examines the "private" and "public" roles of women in public office.<sup>1</sup> For the same reason, I also refrain from discussing the very interesting research on women's symbolic representation, or the effects female officeholders (and candidates) have on women's political engagement (see, for example: Atkeson 2003; Burns, Scholzman, and Verba 2001; Dolan 2005; Lawless 2004; Reingold and Harrell 2005).

### **Review of the Literature: Making a Difference**

More often than not, the research begins by observing the increasing numbers of women elected to public office and asking: What difference does it make? (Mezey 1994). Do the increasing numbers of women in public office mean that women's political interests, concerns, needs, preferences, and perspectives are better represented? Drawing upon Pitkin's (1967) theoretical insights regarding the various concepts of representation, many of us have posed the question in terms of the relationship between women's descriptive representation and women's

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of that more biographical research trajectory in the state politics literature, see Cammisa and Reingold (2004, 183-187). See also, Dolan and Ford (1997, 1998).

substantive representation: Are public officials who “stand for” women more likely to “act for” women? Empirically, most researchers have addressed these sorts of questions by examining whether women and men behave differently in office. (Much less attention has been paid to the actual impact of women on policy outcomes and political processes.) The conclusions have been remarkably similar: women in public office do make a difference. However, I also pay close attention to the exceptions to the rule, for it is those “ifs-and-and-buts” that, I believe, pose the most interesting questions for future research.

### *Policy Preferences*

Investigations of sex differences in the behavior of elected officials often began where the more mainstream studies of representation and legislative behavior often began: with policy preferences and roll call voting. Most of these studies reveal that female policymakers are more likely than their male colleagues to represent women’s interests in two ways. First, elite policy preferences and roll call votes tend to match gender gaps in public opinion; thus, female officeholders are more likely to take liberal positions on a wide array of issues such as gun control, social welfare, civil rights, environmental protection, community development, and public health and safety—as well as on composite measures of liberalism and conservatism (Diamond 1977; Johnson and Carroll 1978; Poole and Zeigler 1985; Welch 1985; Schumaker and Burns 1988; Dodson and Carroll 1991; Burrell 1994; Barrett 1995; Carey, Niemi, and Powell 1998; Clark 1998; Green 2003; Epstein, Niemi, and Powell 2005). Second, even though public opinion on many women’s rights issues (e.g., abortion and the ERA) is not split along gender lines, women in office are more likely to lend their support to such feminist proposals—or, more generally, to liberal proposals on “issues of special concern to women” and women’s

political organizations (Burrell 1994, 158; Diamond 1977; Leader 1977; Johnson and Carroll 1978; Lili, Handberg, and Lowrey 1982; Hill 1983; Thomas 1989; Dodson and Carroll 1991; Day 1994; Barrett 1995; Dolan 1997; Swers 1998, 2002; Epstein, Niemi, and Powell 2005). Together, these studies cover three decades, national, state, and local officials, and every state legislature. And, in almost every instance, the gender differences they report withstand controls for party and district-level factors.

There are several important exceptions and caveats, however. First, some studies have found few, if any, sex differences in lawmakers' policy preferences and roll call votes. Barnello (1999), for example, finds that female members of the New York State Assembly were no more likely than their male colleagues to vote in support of "pro-woman/feminist" (p. 83) measures such as health care access, sexual harassment, and child support. (See also Gehlen 1977; Mezey 1978a, 1978b; Vega and Firestone 1995; Tamerius 1995; Reingold 2000; Wolbrecht 2002.) Second, in few studies do male and female legislators differ on all issues or votes examined. For example, while Thomas (1989) found sex differences in support for women's rights issues among California Assemblymembers, she did not find any evidence of women taking more liberal positions on other issues. (See also Johnson and Carroll 1978; Dodson and Carroll 1991; Barrett 1995.) Third, there is some evidence that in Congress, at least, gender differences in voting behavior have decreased over time "primarily because of the reduction in the liberalism of female members" (Welch 1985, 131; Vega and Firestone 1995; Clark 1998; Swers 2002). (But see Wolbrecht 2002, 196-197.) Fourth, numerous studies have found significant gender gaps only or primarily among Republicans (Welch 1985; Thomas 1989; Burrell 1994; Vega and Firestone 1995; Dolan 1997; Swers 2002).

Finally, with few exceptions (Schumaker and Burns 1988), the sex differences that are revealed are not wide chasms. Rarely is a majority of women pitted against a majority of men.<sup>2</sup> Diamond, for example, describes the policy positions of the women in her study as only “slightly more ‘liberal’” (1977: 49). In Barrett’s analysis of support for “women-targeted” policies among Black and white Democratic state legislators, women scored on average only 1.5 points higher than men on a scale ranging from 1 to 20 (1995: 228). Indeed, most scholars recognize that gender differences in elite policy preferences pale in comparison to party differences. Republican women may be more liberal than GOP men, but rarely are they more liberal than Democrats—male or female. Poole and Zeigler (1985, 173) caution that in the U.S. House of Representatives “[t]he ideological gulf between women Democrats and women Republicans is as wide as that between the men.... Women as a group are as different from each other in party terms as men.”<sup>3</sup>

### *Policy Leadership*

Among students of legislative behavior (in the American context, at least), those interested in the impact of women and gender were among the first to recognize the importance of policy leadership and agenda-setting. “Voting,” Leader pointed out in 1977, “is only one kind of political activity and possibly not the most important. It tells us nothing about who initiates the introduction of feminist legislation and who leads floor fights and mobilizes support” (p. 284). It is within this realm of policy leadership that female officials are most often expected to make a difference for women, as women (Reingold 2000). In particular, women in public office

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, when it comes to roll call votes, a gender gap of even ten percentage points could make the difference between passage or not. Reingold (2000) examines whether or not women’s votes made the difference between a bill passing or not. She found only 5 (out of 100+) such instances, and in every case, the men were shy of a winning majority by only one or two votes (pp. 146-48).

<sup>3</sup> Both Barnello (1999) and Reingold (2000) stress the overwhelming influence of partisanship in structuring roll call voting. In all three states studied (NY, AZ, CA), partisan divisions were so strong that little room was left for anything else to have an impact.

are expected -- by voters, activists, and researchers alike -- to care more about, know more about, and do more about “women’s issues.” These issues include but are not limited to those concerned strictly with women’s rights, economic status, health and safety. Also included (sometimes) are issues often characterized as “soft” or compassionate: anything having to do with children, education, health, social welfare, and the environment. Sometimes, women’s issues are defined strictly in feminist terms; at other times, they are defined more broadly as those related to women’s traditional, domestic roles as wife and mother, caretaker and housekeeper.

To a remarkable extent the research confirms these popular expectations. Across time, space (or office), and political parties, women, more often than men, take the lead on women’s issues, no matter how broadly or narrowly such issues are defined. Women are more likely to express concern about such issues and take an active interest in them, often to the point where they consider themselves experts (Diamond 1977; Barrett 1995; Reingold 2000; Boles 2001; Fridkin and Woodall 2005; Garcia Bedolla, Tate, and Wong 2005). They are more likely to serve on committees relevant to women’s issues (Diamond 1977; Carroll and Taylor 1989a; Thomas and Welch 1991; Thomas 1994; Reingold 2000). They are more likely to craft, introduce (sponsor or co-sponsor), and shepherd legislation addressing such issues (Saint Germain 1989; Thomas and Welch 1991; Thomas 1991, 1994; Dodson and Carroll 1991; Tamerius 1995; Bratton and Haynie 1999; Reingold 2000; Carroll 2001; Swers 2002; Wolbrecht 2002; Bratton 2002, 2005; Bratton, Haynie, and Reingold forthcoming).<sup>4</sup>

Wolbrecht’s (2002) study of the women’s rights agenda in Congress over four decades (1953 to 1992) shows that female legislators are not only more likely than their male

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to examining policy leadership on women’s issues, a few researchers have looked at legislative activity dealing with “men’s” issues such as state fiscal affairs, business and commerce (Diamond 1977; Dodson and Carroll 1991; Thomas and Welch 1991; Thomas 1991, 1994; Reingold 2000; Fridkin and Woodall 2005). Each study shows that, to some degree, male legislators are more actively involved in such legislation than are female legislators.

counterparts to cosponsor such initiatives, but also much more innovative in their approach. Congressional women—especially the Democrats—have been the ones primarily responsible for introducing new women’s rights concerns and suggesting new policy solutions. The research on Congress also reveals that women’s policy leadership extends far beyond bill introduction. It involves constant vigilance throughout the entire policymaking process—in committee and on the floor, as well as behind the scenes (Dodson 1998; Hawkesworth et al. 2001; Norton 2002; Swers 2002; Walsh 2002).

While gender differences in policy leadership are of greater magnitude and more consistent (particularly across space) than those for most other dimensions of representational behavior (examined here), there are still a few notable exceptions to the rule. A few of the earliest studies found no significant differences in the policy priorities of women and men (Gehlen 1977; Mezey 1978a, 1978b; Johnson and Carroll 1978) and even considerable resistance—among both women and men—to the idea that “there is an area of legislative specialization unique to women, or at least in which women are predominantly interested” (Gehlen 1977, 315). More recent research suggests that gender differences in policy leadership may not extend to all women’s issues or to every jurisdiction. Donahue (1997) finds no gender differences in the policy interests of Massachusetts school committee members, all of whom were much more concerned about “the budget, curriculum, staff, facilities, class size, and public dialogue” than they were about issues affecting girls or other potentially disadvantaged students (p. 638). (See also Beck 1991.) Thomas’s (1994) survey of the members of twelve state legislatures finds that while women were more likely than men to rank issues regarding children and family as high priorities, they were no more likely to make education, health, or welfare their personal priority. Reingold (2000) reports that gender differences in policy leadership among

Arizona legislators were larger and spanned a wider range of “women’s issues” than did those among California legislators—not because the California women were slackers, but because the California men were quite active and committed to many of these issues (especially those not specific to women or women’s rights). Swers (2002) finds variation across both issues and time in her study of the 103<sup>rd</sup> and 104<sup>th</sup> Congresses. Gender differences in policy leadership were more pronounced on feminist issues than on social welfare issues, and women’s (especially Republican women’s) willingness and ability to advocate for women’s issues were more constrained in the Republican-controlled 104<sup>th</sup> Congress than in the Democratic-controlled 103<sup>rd</sup> (see also Hawkesworth et al. 2001; Dodson 2005).

### *Policy Impact*

A few studies have examined whether women’s issue bills sponsored by women are more successful than those sponsored by men. The results, however, have been mixed. Saint Germain’s (1989) study of the Arizona state legislature and Thomas’s (1994) analysis both find that passage of such bills is more likely when they are sponsored by women. Yet, in their studies of women’s issue legislation in multiple state legislatures, neither Bratton and Haynie (1999) nor Reingold and Schneider (2001) nor Bratton (2005) find that the sex of the sponsor(s) has any significant effect on the likelihood of passage. More generally, research shows that female legislators, at the state and national level, are at least as successful as (and occasionally more successful than) male legislators in getting their bills passed—no matter what the subject matter (Saint Germain 1989; Thomas and Welch 1991; Thomas 1994; Bratton and Haynie 1999; Ellickson and Whistler 2000; Jeydel and Taylor 2003; Bratton 2005).

Given the combination of women's leadership on women's issues and their legislative success rates, one might expect the links between the presence of women in public office and aggregate policy outcomes to be rather strong—especially when it comes to women's issues. But the research thus far reveals a decidedly mixed picture, at best. Two studies of the impact of women on local policy outcomes offer diametrically opposed findings. Salzstein (1986) finds that female mayors, in cities across the nation, made a significant difference “in terms of the equitable provision of municipal jobs to women” in the late 1970s (p. 144). Schumaker and Burn's (1988) study of the resolution of local policy issues in Lawrence, Kansas, however, shows that policy outcomes were more likely to reflect the preferences of male policymakers than those of their female counterparts—and not simply because there were fewer women than men involved. Rather, the authors demonstrate that changes in local policy were more sensitive to men's leadership efforts than to women's.

Most research on state-level policy outcomes demonstrates little or no relationship between the proportions of women serving in the state legislature and policy change or innovation. Neither Saint Germain (1989) nor Thomas (1994) finds any significant or consistent relationship between the percentage of women in the legislature and the likelihood that women's bills or women's-issue bills (regardless of sponsor) would be enacted. Similarly, neither Tolbert and Steuernagel (2001) nor Weldon (2004) find any evidence that women's presence in state legislatures had an effect (positive or negative) on the adoption of women's health or domestic violence policy, respectively. Crowley's (2004) study of state policy adoption of child support measures, however, does show that the percentage of women in the legislature had a significant, positive effect, all other things being equal. Reingold and Schneider (2001) also find that a

higher proportion of women in state legislatures increased the likelihood of women's issue bills (more generally defined) winning final passage.

More qualitative, in-depth studies of women in Congress have been more optimistic about the ability of women in office to make a difference in this respect. Norton (2002) details how women's efforts in relevant committees, subcommittees, and (especially) conference committees have shaped both the content and the prospects of reproductive rights policy. Hawkesworth et al. (2001) document numerous instances during the 103<sup>rd</sup> and 104<sup>th</sup> Congresses in which policy initiatives on behalf of women's interests would have failed but for the collective and individual heroics of various congresswomen, especially those in leadership positions.

Clearly, more research on aggregate policy outcomes is needed—not only because of the mixed results produced thus far, but also because this type of research has been neglected far too long. Researchers have devoted much more attention to individual level gender differences in the behavior of public officials than to the institutional impact of women in office. As Saltzstein argued long ago, we cannot simply assume that being different and acting differently assures that women will, in fact, make a difference. “Thus, the answer to the question as to what difference it makes if women are elected to office not only must address what those women *do* in office but also must address what others do in response or reaction to their presence” (Saltzstein 1986, 142).

### *Legislative and Leadership Styles*

In addition to affecting policy inputs and outputs, women in public office often are expected to practice politics differently and, perhaps even alter the policymaking process. Thus, political scientists have long wondered whether the “rules of the game” are gendered

(Kirkpatrick 1974). In this literature, dominant norms and approaches to policymaking and leadership are often described in very masculine terms: formal, hierarchical, authoritative relationships; win-lose, zero-sum competition and conflict; and interpersonal dynamics such as coercion, control, dominance, and manipulation (see especially, Kathlene 1998; Rosenthal 1998; Thomas 1994, 1997). In contrast, women's approaches to policymaking and leadership are expected to emphasize: empowering, egalitarian, mutually beneficial, reciprocal relationships; compromise, consensus-building, and cooperation; and interpersonal skills such as honesty, openness, mutual respect, and personal/moral integrity.

Much research has confirmed these expectations. In one of the most thorough treatments, Kathlene's study of the Colorado state legislature contrasts women's "contextual" approach and men's "instrumental" approach to policy making and uncovers a variety of ways in which "women are changing the policy process" (1998: 189). Examining the number and variety of sources the legislators use to keep informed (Kathlene 1989) and the ways they assess policy problems and formulate solutions (Kathlene 1995), she finds that women act on a broader, more inclusive, community-oriented basis. In an innovative analysis of conversational dynamics in committee hearings, Kathlene (1994) also finds that female committee chairs use their positions of power to facilitate open discussions among committee members, sponsors, and witnesses while their male counterparts use their positions to control the hearings.

Studies of larger, national samples of state legislative leaders confirm and reinforce Kathlene's arguments. Whicker and Jewell (1998; Jewell and Whicker 1994) find women more likely to adopt egalitarian "consensus" styles and institution-building "process" oriented goals, and men more likely to adopt controlling "command" styles and self-centered "power" oriented

goals.<sup>5</sup> Rosenthal's (1998) survey of state legislative committee chairs finds that this growing cohort of female leaders is introducing a more "integrative" alternative to the paradigmatic "transactional" and "aggregative" leadership styles of men. "This integrative style," she explains, "emphasizes collaboration and consensus and sees politics as something more than satisfying particular interests" (1998, p. 4). (See also: Dodson and Carroll 1991; Rosenthal 2005).

Rinehart's (1991) study of big-city mayors and Fox and Schuhmann's (1999) study of city managers provide evidence that gendered leadership styles can be found at the local level as well.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps due to the complete absence of women in leadership positions until very recently, Swers and Larson (2005) are the only researchers thus far who have had anything to say about gendered leadership styles in Congress. They note that both Nancy Pelosi (D) and Deborah Pryce (R) have been recognized by colleagues and the press for their consensus-building, inclusive, and egalitarian approaches to leadership (2005, 121-122).

On the other hand, a number of studies focusing on rank-and-file politicians report little or no gender differences in leadership approaches or legislative styles. In the 1988 national survey of state legislators conducted by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), majorities of both sexes considered all leadership traits listed very important and preferred more inclusive, cooperative, and democratic alternatives for exercising committee leadership (Dodson and Carroll 1991, 83). Similarly, Reingold's (1996, 2000) interviews with Arizona and California legislators show remarkable consensus in responses to questions about strategies for

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<sup>5</sup> Whicker and Jewell (1998) also note that while women were more likely than men to adopt "consensus" styles and "process" goals, men and women alike found these "female" leadership types more appealing than the "male" ones. Indeed, Whicker and Jewell conclude that legislative leadership has been "feminized." The "command" styles and "power" goals that were once the norm are now considered old, tired, and no longer functional given the new demands of increasingly professional legislators and legislatures. Kirkpatrick (1974) and Reingold (1996, 2000) suggest, however, that cooperative norms are nothing new. Both note that classic texts on American legislative politics, "whose evidence was based chiefly on males" (Kirkpatrick 1974: 134), attest to the widespread adherence to ideals of professional courtesy, collegiality, and reciprocity among legislators

<sup>6</sup> While city managers are not elected officials, Fox and Schuhmann (1999) are asking very similar questions in their research. Given the paucity of research on local public officials, I couldn't resist including it here.

legislative success and conceptions of personal power. Male and female legislators alike stressed the importance and value of honesty, good personal relationships, hard work, compromise, and consensus-building and placed sanctions, or at least strict limits, on manipulation, coercion, and intimidation. Reingold also finds that, while there were quite a few legislators who were willing to cross these boundaries of acceptable, normative behavior and engage in “hard-ball” politics, the men were no more likely than the women to do so. (See also Kirkpatrick 1974; Blair and Stanley 1991.) At the local level, Donahue (1997) finds very few differences in the ways school committee members participate in policy deliberations, and what few differences do occur show men playing a more facilitative role than women—asking questions, asking other people to talk, thanking people, etc. (But see Beck 1991.) At the national level, Fridkin and Woodall’s (2005) analysis of U.S. Senators’ press releases shows women spending significantly more time than men emphasizing their “male” traits (e.g., knowledgeable, strong leader, tough, competent, experienced, consistent, hardworking), and men being more likely to stress their “female” traits (e.g., honest, compassionate, empathetic, sensitive, trustworthy, moral) than their “male” traits.

### *Constituent Responsiveness*

In the search for gender differences among public officials, most of the attention has been focused on policymaking. Some research, however, has examined more constituent-oriented matters. Here, the expectations and assumptions are similar to those guiding research on legislative and leadership styles. If women are more people-oriented, other-directed, caring, and connected than men, then female representatives should pay more attention to their constituents, care more about them and their needs, and, spend more time on constituent-related activities than their male colleagues do.

Numerous studies have found that female state and local officials are apt to believe they are more responsive to constituents, more approachable, more trusted, and more committed to community relations and public education than their male colleagues are (Diamond 1977; Johnson and Carroll 1978; Mezey 1978c; Merritt 1980; Flammang 1985; Beck 1991). And a good deal of research comparing the representational priorities of women and men in public office confirms these perceptions. Richardson and Freeman's (1995) survey of Colorado, Maryland, North Carolina, and Ohio state legislators finds twice as many women than men believed they "put more emphasis on constituency service than the typical legislator in my state" (p. 171). Moreover, the women, on average, reported receiving significantly more requests for constituency casework than did similarly-situated men. In two national surveys of state legislators, conducted in 1995 and 2002 (Carey, Neimi, and Powell 1998; Epstein, Niemi, and Powell 2005), women reported devoting significantly more time than men did to keeping in touch with constituents and helping constituents with their problems—even controlling for a variety of district and state level factors likely to affect how legislators spend their time (e.g., professionalization and size of legislature, seniority). (See also Bers 1978; Johnson and Carroll 1978; Thomas 1992.)

There are few exceptions, but once again they are notable for the questions they raise. Reingold's (2000) analysis of constituent responsiveness among Arizona and California legislators incorporates many of the same measures employed by Niemi, Powell, and associates (1998, 2005), but uncovers very few significant gender differences. Women and men in this study spent equivalent amounts of time on constituent casework and meeting with constituents and were in agreement regarding the importance of such activities. A few studies have investigated whether the expectation that female officials are more responsive to their

constituents can be extended to the classic delegate-trustee dilemma. When faced with having to choose between their constituents' desires and their own preferences, are women more likely than men to adopt the delegate role and defer to their constituents' wishes, and less likely to adopt the more independent trustee alternative? Apparently not. Githens (1977) concludes that the delegate role "does not fully or adequately convey the role perceptions" of the Maryland female legislators she interviewed: "There does not appear to be an overwhelming concern on the part of the women to consult with their constituents in order to take action on legislation, or any clearly and sharply focused commitment to mirror accurately the sentiments of the electors, or even to be bound by popular mandate" (Githens 1977, 206-7; see also Diamond 1977, 47-49). Reingold (2000) too finds that the delegate role appealed to relatively few Arizona and California legislators, male or female.

Both Githens and Reingold suggest that the delegate role is more often rejected than embraced because it is associated with passiveness, subservience to the will of others, and lack of (or lack of confidence in one's) leadership, judgment, and conviction – all gender stereotypes that may haunt female politicians in particular. To illustrate, Beck (1991) finds that while male and female local council members agreed that the women they worked with were more responsive to constituents, they differed in the value they placed on such behavior. The women believed their willingness to listen to constituents made them better representatives, but the men criticized the women for caving in to irate and emotional constituents, for being too "soft hearted" and not "analytic enough" (pp. 107-108). Indeed, in a world where legislative (or, more generally, policy) accomplishments are associated with institutional power and political prestige, public officials may very well feel the need to avoid devoting "too much" time to their

constituency (Caldeira and Patterson 1988; Hibbing and Thomas 1990; Caldeira, Clark, and Patterson 1993; Reingold 2000, 105-106).

While all of the research on constituent responsiveness discussed thus far has approached the idea of constituency as a single, undifferentiated whole, a few studies have explored the possibility that female officials may be more likely than their male colleagues to “see,” appreciate, understand, and respond to their female constituents in particular. Here, the research (what little there is) is unanimous. Mueller’s (1987) study of the women attending CAWP’s first National Forum for State Legislators in 1983 reveals a strong consensus among the attendees that “women are a special constituency,” and that “women legislators have a special responsibility to women” (p. 230). Thomas (1994) and Reingold (1992, 2000) both confirm that women as a constituency group figure more prominently in the minds of female state legislators than in those of their male counterparts. In Reingold’s study, female state legislators were more likely to perceive women as one of their most supportive constituency groups; more confident in their ability or responsibility to advocate what they perceived to be issues of particular concern to their female constituents; and much more likely to see themselves as representatives of women, women’s groups, or women’s issues. (See also Barrett 1997.)

Similarly, almost all the female Members of Congress interviewed by CAWP in the late 1990s said they felt a “responsibility to represent women” regardless of whether those women resided within or outside their own districts (Carroll 2002, 53; Dodson 1998; Hawkesworth et al. 2001). Nonetheless, the congresswomen differed quite a bit in how they explained and described that responsibility. “Women differ in the solutions they see to the problems women face, they differ in the kinds of women they represent, and they differ in the extent to which these concerns are salient” (Dodson 1998, 148; see also Reingold 2000). As Carroll (2002, 66-67) explains, this

diversity among women has very important implications for researchers interested in whether or not women in public office are making a difference by acting for women:

All of these differences, and perhaps other differences as well, can influence how congresswomen translate their perceived responsibility to represent women's interests into actual policy decisions. As a result, even when women members of Congress act in ways that they perceive as representing women, their actions may not always look the same. They may vote differently, offer different amendments, or favor different legislative solutions. Consequently, the changes in policy making that result from congresswomen's surrogate representation of women's interests will not always be unidirectional, straightforward, or uncomplicated.

### **Directions for Future Research: Explaining Variations**

What emerges from the literature is clear: the links between women's descriptive and substantive representation are numerous and strong, especially at the individual level. In various ways and across various political jurisdictions—before, during, and after the heady “Year of the Woman” (1992)—female officials have been more likely than their male counterparts to act for women and women's interests. What emerges from all the caveats and exceptions, however, is equally clear: the link between women's descriptive and substantive representation is by no means guaranteed or automatic. The existence or strength of that linkage can—and often does—vary across individuals, time, and space. Yet it is this variation—particularly the differences among women (and men) and the complicated interactions between individuals and institutions (broadly conceived)—that has been neglected in much of the extant research literature. This is where we need to turn our attention. Why do some women (and men) make more of a difference than others? What makes some institutions more conducive than others to women's substantive representation—by women or men?

Researchers have begun to address these types of questions. For many of us, the profound changes in the politics of women's representation, observed by Swers (2002) and the research team at CAWP (Hawkesworth et al. 2001), between the Democratic controlled 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress (1993-94) and the Republican controlled 104<sup>th</sup> (1995-96), served as a wake-up call. The election of more conservative women, the new Republican majority, and the more ideologically polarized climate all seemed to conspire to weaken the links between women's descriptive and substantive representation in Congress. While women's numbers were increasing, their willingness and ability to pursue an agenda of women's issues (individually or collectively) waned. As researchers, we could no longer ignore the differences among female public officials and the power of political institutions to shape the policy making process from beginning to end. As the preceding paragraphs demonstrate, those differences among individual female officeholders, across institutions, and over time were always there. But I suspect many of us were not quite certain what to make of them.

What I hope to demonstrate in the following paragraphs is that, upon a closer examination, the extant research can provide many of the analytic and theoretical tools we need to make sense of all those differences and variations. More specifically, the available literature offers a good number of tentative hypotheses and key variables that might help explain varying patterns in the relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation. I propose we direct our attention to at least three levels of analysis: (1) individual legislators and their social identities, experiences, perspectives, positions, and constituencies; (2) institutional structures within representative policymaking bodies; and (3) socio-political forces surrounding those governing bodies, temporally and geographically. These are the sorts of factors that most

likely shape both the desire and the ability of women (and men) in public office to act for women—as well as their conceptions of what women’s substantive representation entails.

### *Individuals*

#### (a) Party and Ideology

As the research on gender differences in officials’ policy preferences and priorities often reminds us, there is no denying that Democratic and Republican women often disagree—just as Democratic and Republican men do. More often than not, both gender and party have significant, independent effects; in some cases, party and gender interact so that gender differences in one party are greater than gender differences in the other. As a result, the existing literature suggests that when it comes to a demonstrated commitment to women’s substantive representation, Democratic women would be ranked the highest and Republican men the lowest. Depending on the measure (the dimension of representational behavior or the specific issue or issues at hand), Democratic men and Republican women would alternate between second and third position.

That women’s substantive representation depends on both gender and party should come as no surprise, given that most women’s issues, as defined in the literature, are at least moderately feminist and/or liberal.<sup>7</sup> Even when women’s issues are defined in terms of women’s “traditional” interests in social welfare, they are usually proposals that call for expanding government efforts to protect and support the rights and well being of the vulnerable and marginalized among us. But this also suggests that political and gender *ideologies* also play important roles in how public officials define women’s issues or women’s interests, how actively they pursue them, and how willingly they support them.

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<sup>7</sup> Bratton (2005, 106) provides a very helpful chart outlining the various conceptions of women’s issues in the literature.

Dolan and Ford (1995, 1998) are one of the very few (if not the only) researchers who have examined feminist identity among women in public office, as an independent variable. In their national survey of female state legislators, Dolan and Ford (1995) found that those who identified as feminist were more likely than those who did not to list issues concerning women, children, and families among their policy priorities and to take concerted efforts to encourage more women to become active in politics. The feminist and non-feminist women also differed in what they thought were the most important problems facing women in the U.S.; the former were more likely to cite issues of “personal autonomy” (e.g., physical abuse, reproductive rights) and job/economic security (Dolan and Ford 1998, 84). Although Dolan and Ford’s (1995) multivariate analysis suggests that at least some of these differences between feminist and non-feminist women may disappear once we control for political ideology, their research alone cannot and should not be considered the last, definitive word on the significance of feminist identity or consciousness among public officials.

Recent research on women’s representation in Congress has been particularly helpful in highlighting the significance of political ideology—above and beyond partisanship. Swers (2002) analysis is one of the few that is designed to take both party and ideology into account, simultaneously; and she finds that both often act in concert with gender to structure congressional behavior on women’s issues. Yet, the election of more conservative Republican women to Congress in recent years (since 1994) has made it clear that most of the efforts and gains on behalf of women and women’s interests have depended and will continue to depend on the ability of Democratic and moderate Republican women to forge effective bipartisan coalitions (see especially Hawkesworth et al. 2001).

As early as the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress, these Democratic and moderate Republican women themselves recognized the challenges ahead. According to Carroll (2002, 63-64), they “tended to see the major dividing line among women [in Congress] not as party, but rather as ideology. In particular, they saw several of the women in the cohort of conservative freshmen elected in 1994 as ideological outliers....” Swers and Larson (2005) report that, in the years since then, the number of conservative Republican women in Congress has increased and “more of these women have taken leading roles in championing antifeminist proposals” (p. 124). What we may be seeing, then, is evidence that gender consciousness among female public officials can come in both liberal/feminist and conservative/anti-feminist varieties (Swers and Larson 2005, 125-126). This, in turn, raises some very interesting questions about how we as researchers define and measure women’s political interests and women’s substantive representation. To what extent and how should such antifeminist initiatives be incorporated into our analyses?

Dodson (2005) raises these very questions and suggests that, to distinguish public officials who act for women from those who do not, we must not only examine who advocates what in committees and on the floor, but also look more closely at whether there is a conscious effort to forge responsive connections with women and women’s groups. I second that notion and add that this means we need to devote more attention to how public officials view their various constituencies, and how women, women’s organizations or groups, and women’s interests figure into those perceptions. Taking a page from Fenno (1978), we must recognize that the constituencies that matter most to electorally-minded officials are not those defined strictly in geographic terms. Women may constitute roughly half of all district-level constituents, but they may figure much more prominently in some politicians’ winning coalitions than in others.

Moreover, elected officials may distinguish certain types of women, women's groups, and women's causes as more or less supportive.

(b) Race and Ethnicity

While almost every study of women in public office acknowledges at least the potential significance of partisan and ideological differences, very few have recognized the potential significance of racial and ethnic diversity. As a result, the experiences of women of color and questions about *their* representation are too often ignored and/or marginalized; and what we think we know about "women" in public office may only be applicable to the majority of white, non-Hispanic women. Theories of intersectionality (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1998; Glenn 1992; Hurtado 1996; King 1988), in combination with what little empirical research is available, strongly caution against over-generalizing from the gendered experiences of the dominant majority to those of marginalized minority groups. To the contrary, they suggest that research on the representation of women of color may be a particularly fruitful vantage-point from which to consider the fact that gender is only one of many politically significant dimensions of social identity.

Most of the empirical research thus far demonstrates that women of color are uniquely situated to recognize that the demands for both racial/ethnic and gender representation, while not completely overlapping, are more likely to be mutually reinforcing and interdependent than mutually exclusive and independent. Barrett (1997), for example, uncovers some very interesting dynamics between gender and race in her study of Democratic state legislators' beliefs about their roles and responsibilities vis-à-vis issues of concern to women and minorities. Black and white female legislators, as well as black male legislators, were more likely than white male

legislators to agree that “Women legislators should pay attention foremost to women’s issues,” and that “It is necessary to have women in state legislatures to ensure that women’s concerns get addressed” (pp. 135-36). Black lawmakers, female and male, were more likely than their white counterparts to agree that minority legislators should pay attention to minority issues and that such issues would not be addressed without the presence of minorities in state legislatures. Among white legislators, however, the women were more likely to agree with these sentiments than were the men. (See also, Barrett 1995.) Carroll (2002, 57) notes that, while the commitment to representing women was widely shared among the congresswomen interviewed by CAWP, the women of color among them “talked in somewhat different ways” about that responsibility. Some “expressed the inseparability of their identities as, and their responsibilities to, people of color and women;” others expressed a particularly strong sense of responsibility to poor and working class women, or to women outside the United States borders. Garcia Bedolla, Tate, and Wong (2005) reach similar, albeit more tentative, conclusions about the potential impact of women of color in Congress. In the case of Latinas in particular: “it is likely that [their] presence...provides support for policy issues of importance to all Latinos and promotes a greater focus on the concerns of women of color, particularly those who are living in poverty” (Garcia Bedolla, Tate, and Wong 2005, 174).

The latest research focusing on women of color in state legislatures is equally illuminating. Bratton, Haynie, and Reingold’s (forthcoming) analysis of bill introductions in ten state legislatures reveals that African American female lawmakers are uniquely responsive to both black interests and women’s interests. They sponsored just as many black interest measures as did African American men, and just as many women’s interest measures as did non-black women. Moreover, these African American female lawmakers were more likely than any other

racial-gender group to sponsor at least one black interest and one women's interest bill. (But see Bratton and Haynie 1999, Table 1.) In a new study of Latina/o state legislators, Fraga et al. (2005) are developing a theory of "strategic intersectionality," positing that Latina public officials "are uniquely positioned to leverage the intersectionality of their ethnicity and gender in ways that are of strategic benefit in the legislative process" and that enable them "to be the most effective long term advocates on behalf of working class communities of color" (pp. 1-2). Their initial findings show that, while Latina and Latino state legislators share the same basic policy priorities, Latinas are more likely to forge legislative coalitions across ethnic and gender lines, and are more likely to attempt to balance women's interests and Latino interests in situations in which they come into conflict.

Other researchers, however, caution that women of color in elective office may face obstacles that are qualitatively and quantitatively different from those faced by either men of color or white women. Hawkesworth (2003) painstakingly documents the ways that "racing-gendering" worked in the 103<sup>rd</sup> and 104<sup>th</sup> Congress to marginalize women of color and the interests they attempted to represent. "Silencing, excluding, marginalizing, segregating, discrediting, dismissing, discounting, insulting, stereotyping, and patronizing are used singly and in combination to fix women of color 'in their place'" (p. 531). Smooth's (2001) analysis of the power and influence of African American women in state legislative office traces similar processes by which race and gender—racism and sexism—interact to impose particularly tenacious constraints on women of color. (See also Darling 1998.) On the other hand, Hawkesworth (2003) notes, the anger and resistance engendered by these experiences may help to explain why Congresswomen of color adopt the policy preferences and legislative priorities

they do, especially those preferences and priorities that seem doomed to failure but speak forcefully and respectfully on behalf of poor women of color (e.g., opposing welfare reform).

(c) Position Power

While the research on state legislators often reveals significant gender differences in the ways committee chairs and party leaders exert power and influence, it is the congressional research that highlights the power of institutional positions to shape policy efforts of women on behalf of women's interests. I will have more to say about the impact of women's collective status in governing bodies; here, I want to focus briefly on the effects of position power on individual-level policymaking behavior.

Norton's (1995, 2002) research on reproductive policy activity in Congress over three decades (1969-1998) demonstrates how important committee and subcommittee membership can be, even on such highly salient issues. According to Norton, very little significant reproductive policy activity in Congress (especially the House of Representatives) takes place outside of committees and subcommittees; even participation on the floor and in conference committees depends in large part on relevant committee and/or subcommittee assignments. Yet, only since 1993 have congresswomen gained access to such critical committee positions; without that access, their ability to participate in, much less influence, reproductive policymaking was minimal at best. Swers' (2002) in-depth analysis of congressional policymaking on a wider range of women's issues expands on this theme. From bill introduction to roll-call voting, her research shows that the ability of congresswomen to legislate on behalf of women is constrained not only by their access to key committee positions, but also by their level of seniority and their status as a member of the majority or minority party (which determine their access to positions of

institutional power on committees and within party leadership). (See also Hawkesworth et al. 2001.)<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps this comes as no surprise to congressional scholars; those who wield institutional power are those most likely to influence policy, regardless of gender (e.g., Hall 1996). Yet, Swers (2002; Swers and Larson 2005) offers an additional, important insight: institutional status helps determine not only the success or effectiveness of women's policy efforts; it can also affect the decision to pursue those efforts in the first place. If one assumes, as Swers does, that legislators (male and female) are strategic actors, seeking to maximize their re-election chances, policy goals, and internal influence (Fenno 1973), then it makes sense that they will choose to pursue only those policy proposals that are viable, that are likely to help them gain re-election, change policy, or amass institutional influence. Access to key committees, key committee positions, majority party status, and party leadership will likely make some policy proposals more viable and, thus, worthwhile than others. In short, we should not assume that policy priorities of public officials are exogenous reflections of pure, sincere preferences. Rather, they are likely to be determined at least in part by strategic assessments of institutional power arrangements and political opportunities.

### *Institutions*

Those who study women in American politics are well aware that political institutions are gendered institutions (Kenney 1996). Historically male-dominated, the institutional norms, procedures, rules, regulations, goals, and processes of governing bodies such as legislatures, city councils, and school boards all have potentially gendered implications and biases. Yet, in the

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<sup>8</sup> Saltzstein (1986) also shows that the impact of female mayors on gender parity in municipal employment is greater when they have greater institutional authority—i.e., in the absence of city managers.

study of women's political representation, surprisingly little attention has been focused directly on the inner workings of governing institutions and their gendered consequences. Are all institutions equally and similarly gendered? Which institutions and institutional arrangements are more or less conducive to women's political representation—and why/how? In this section, I will highlight what little we have ascertained thus far, and direct our attention to some potentially fruitful avenues for future research. There is, no doubt, a myriad of institutional arrangements that could affect women's political representation, but I shall discuss only those three that have received significant attention in the extant literature: “critical mass” or the number of women present; the institutional status of women as a group; and party control.<sup>9</sup>

#### (a) Critical Mass

Although the 50 state legislatures offer fertile ground for systematic, comparative institutional analyses, there are relatively few studies of women's representation in state legislatures that take advantage of such opportunities. Thus far, most of these studies employ some version of “critical mass” theory in their attempts to explain variations across states in the relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation. Applying Kanter's (1977) work on the effects of sex ratios on group behavior in corporate settings, political scientists studying state legislators (most notably Thomas 1994) have theorized that the degree to which women “make a difference” depends upon their numbers or proportions within these legislative institutions. The theory (as adapted) posits that when women constitute a very small “token” minority (usually thought to be around 15% or less), the pressures to conform to male norms are too great, and the collective will and power to resist are too weak. But as more and

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<sup>9</sup> The only other institutional variable discussed at any length in the literature, of which I am aware, is legislative professionalism. For a full discussion of the very few and very mixed arguments regarding the effects of professionalization on women's representation in state legislatures, see Cammisa and Reingold (2004).

more women are elected, and as the numbers and proportions of women serving in state legislatures increase (either across states or over time), such pressures will be overcome more easily. Transformation of state politics by women, for women will be more likely to occur, according to this “critical mass” theory, when women constitute at least a substantial minority (20-30%) of state legislators.

Two of the earliest and most often cited tests of critical mass theory produced encouraging results. In her longitudinal study of bill introduction and passage in the Arizona legislature, Saint Germain (1989) finds that as the percentage of women increased so too did their legislative activity on behalf of “women’s traditional interests.” The increasing numbers of female colleagues, however, had no such effect on the activities of male Arizona legislators; the percentage of their bills devoted to women’s traditional interests remained constant over the years. As more and more women entered the legislature, more and more legislation concerning women’s interests was introduced, and it became increasingly likely that the sponsors of such bills were women. Thomas’s cross-sectional research on policy priorities (1991 and 1994) of state lawmakers also uncovers a positive relationship between the percentage of women in the legislature and the likelihood that they will be more likely than their male colleagues to take the lead on legislation concerning women, children, and families.

Nonetheless, both these studies, and several subsequent ones, raise serious questions about the empirical validity and internal logic of critical mass theory. First, Saint Germain (1989) finds no consistent pattern in the relationship between the growing numbers of women in the Arizona state legislature and frequency with which those women introduced “feminist” bills. Furthermore, as Saint Germain herself realizes, her study of a single state cannot establish a causal relationship between the percentage of women in the legislature and legislative activity on

behalf of women. The changes she observes over time could be due to other factors, such as increasing professionalization, the general impact of the women's movement, and the changing characteristics and experiences of female legislators themselves. For example, the Arizona female legislators may have been more and more willing to introduce legislation related to women's traditional interests because they gained more and more seniority and institutional power, not because their numbers rose.

Second, as noted above in the "Policy Impact" section, neither Saint Germain nor Thomas (1994) finds any significant or consistent relationship between the percentage of women in the legislatures and aggregate policy outcomes. Thomas (1994) also looks at the relationship between the overall amount of attention devoted to women's issues (by female and male legislators) and the percentage of women in the state legislatures. In this respect too, her findings lend little support for a critical mass effect. The legislatures with the highest percentages of women were not those with highest levels of legislative activity on behalf of women, children, and families. The two states with the lowest percentages of women (less than 10%) did, however, have the lowest levels of activity devoted to women's issues. At most, Thomas concludes, this suggests "that at least 10 percent female representation is necessary for women's distinctive interests to emerge" (1994, 99). (But see Bratton 2005 and footnote 11 below.)

Other studies have found little or no evidence confirming critical mass hypotheses that female officials will avoid acting for women until they are surrounded by more female colleagues (Diamond 1977, 172; Carroll and Taylor 1989b; Thomas and Welch 1991; Ford and Dolan 1995; Considine and Deutchman, 1996; Barrett 1997; Donahue 1997; Bratton 2002). And some of the more recent research on women in state legislatures suggests that the gender composition of an institution may have very different (or at least more complicated) effects on

the representation of women than the linear, positive relationship initially envisioned by critical mass theory.

Kathlene (1994) and Rosenthal (1998), for example, suggest that the empowering effects of critical mass may be mitigated by a backlash from male colleagues who feel their dominant status threatened by the increasing numbers of women.<sup>10</sup> Comparing conversational dynamics across committee hearings in the Colorado legislature, Kathlene (1994) finds that as the proportion of women participating increased, the men became more verbally aggressive and conversationally dominant. “Contrary to some scholarly expectations,” she concludes, “the more women on a committee, the more silenced women became” (p. 573).

Rosenthal’s (1998) study of leadership styles among state legislative committee chairs reveals that the effects of women’s increasing power within legislative institutions (namely, their ability to gain committee chairs and party leadership positions) may be more empirically and theoretically significant than the effects of women’s increasing numbers. “[A]s women’s share of institutional power increases,” Rosenthal (1998, 90) reports, “male committee chairs become less inclined toward such integrative behaviors of leadership as collaboration, inclusiveness, and accommodation, whereas women committee chairs become more likely to embrace these integrative strategies.” In other words, women’s increasing institutional power promotes both the sort of positive, transformative effects among women that the critical mass theory predicts and the negative, resistant effects among men that a backlash theory would predict. In contrast, Rosenthal does not find a strong, consistent pattern in the relationship between the numbers of women serving in state legislatures and the propensity of committee chairs (female or male) to adopt more integrative leadership styles.

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<sup>10</sup> Both Kathlene (1994) and Rosenthal (1998) rely on Yoder’s (1991) work and her “intrusiveness” hypothesis: dominant group members resist intruders and react “with defensive strategies aimed at containing the advances made by the intrusive minority” (1991, 188; cited in Rosenthal 1998, 81).

Bratton's (2005) recent study of three state legislatures over four decades calls explicitly for a critical re-examination of critical mass theory. She finds no evidence that "token" women are any less likely to introduce women's interest bills or that they are any less successful in getting their bills passed or in assuming leadership positions. For the most part, Bratton finds that regardless of the gender composition of the state legislature: (a) women are more likely than men to sponsor women's interest legislation; (b) women are as likely as men to get their bills passed; (c) women's interest legislation is just as likely to succeed as any other measures are; and (d) neither gender nor the sponsorship of women's interest bills has any effect on the likelihood of holding a leadership position.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in the few instances in which the gender composition of the legislature did seem to matter, "token" women appeared *more* distinctive in their agenda-setting activity and *more* successful in bill passage. (See also Crowley 2004.)

As Bratton (2005) points out, Kanter (1977) herself recognizes that minimization of gender differences (via conformity to male norms) may not be women's only response to tokenism. Token women may also respond by overachieving or promoting themselves and their achievements. Furthermore, Bratton argues, in legislative (as opposed to corporate) settings where female officials "may be regarded as experts on political matters of relevance to women, and may be encouraged to focus on women's issues" the incentives to distinguish oneself as an advocate of women may be greater than the incentives to act just like men. This is, in fact, what Kanter (1977) sees as the essence of tokenism: being expected to be representative of and accountable to one's group.

There are additional reasons to believe that, among legislators at least, token women may be more (rather than less) likely to assume responsibility for women's substantive representation.

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<sup>11</sup> Bratton (2005) does find some evidence supporting critical mass effects at the aggregate level. Legislatures with higher proportions of women saw more bill activity on women's issues—initiated by both women and men—than did those with lower proportions of women.

Both Reingold (2000) and Carroll (2002) note that female officials often explain that their commitment to representing women is a response to the realization that no one else is going to do it. Their research (Carroll and Taylor 1989b; Reingold 2000) also suggests that as the numbers of women in public office increases, individual female officeholders may perceive less need to assume those responsibilities themselves. In both cases, female legislators appeared more willing to act for women in settings with fewer women present. Bratton, Haynie, and Reingold (forthcoming) also find some evidence that African American female state legislators sponsor fewer women's interest bills in more gender diverse settings. This stands in contrast to their bill activity on behalf of black interests, which remains steady regardless of how racially diverse the legislature. As Bratton, Haynie, and Reingold suggest, this divergence may be explained by the fact that, in almost every state legislature, there were more women (and men) willing to introduce women's interest bills than there were African Americans (or others) willing to introduce black interest bills. In other words, the responsibility for women's substantive representation could be shared more easily and evenly than the responsibility for black substantive representation.

This literature on critical mass demonstrates just how complicated and conditional the linkage between women's descriptive representation and women's substantive representation can be. There is little evidence to support the notion that an increase in the numbers of women in public office (in and of itself) has a straightforward impact on their behavior, their colleagues' behavior, or their representative institutions as a whole. Instead, the research on critical mass reinforces the need to examine the processes that link descriptive and substantive representation more closely—and to further expand our list of institutional factors that may affect those processes.

(b) Women's Institutional Power

I have already highlighted the importance of women's position power for both individual level behavior and policy outcomes representative of women's interests. Here, I first want to emphasize that gaining positions of institutional power affects not only the individual women occupying such positions, but the other women as well. In a 2004 on-line survey conducted by the Women's Legislative Network of the National Council of State Legislatures, a large majority of female state legislators "acknowledge that their effectiveness and inclusion depends on having women in key positions" (Rosenthal 2005, 211). Most also believe that the men in leadership positions "forget to include women" and "discount women's advice" in their decision-making.

I also want to suggest that women's institutional power is not only a function of the number of women, or the number of women occupying committee and party leadership positions. It may also be a function of women's capacity to organize collectively. Thomas (1994) was one of the first to draw attention to the power of women's legislative caucuses in particular. Noting that women's issue bills were more likely to pass in state legislatures that had a formal women's caucus, she concludes:

A certain amount of support could be counted on from female colleagues, but this in itself would not be enough to ensure bill passage, since women were not (and still are not) a majority in any state. Thus, legitimacy within the wider legislative environment had to be a prerequisite. Higher percentages of women in the legislature are one way to achieve visibility and power. Another is the presence of a formal caucus. When a caucus bands together, it represents political clout – a weapon with the potential to overcome skewed groups (Thomas 1994, 100).

Studies of congressional policymaking by and for women also demonstrate that success was often dependent on the willingness and ability of congresswomen to coalesce and collaborate, which in turn was dependent not only on the number and diversity of women themselves, but

also on the organizational resources and institutional clout of the (now defunct) Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues (Hawkesworth et al. 2001; Dodson 1998). The links between women's descriptive and substantive representation appeared strongest when the CCWI was able to reach a bipartisan consensus on a specific agenda of women's issues, and promote it as such. Absent that level of consensus, women's efforts to act for women often floundered.

### (c) Party Control and Dominant Factions

The story of the demise of the CCWI, as told by Gertzog (2002, 2004), is indicative of several variables I believe are important for understanding the complicated links between women's descriptive and substantive representation, including the growing divisions among women and, sadly/ironically, the increasing numbers and institutional power of individual congresswomen. "In short, the ambition, entrepreneurial spirit, and ideological diversity characteristic of contemporary congresswomen have tended to discourage many of them from taking an active role in CCWI activities" (Gertzog 2002, 115). But perhaps the biggest blow to the CCWI came when the Republicans, under the leadership of Newt Gingrich, took control of the House of Representatives and stripped the CCWI and all other Legislative Service Organizations of their institutional resources.

According to Hawkesworth (2003), this move to abolish all congressional LSOs may have appeared neutral on its face, but it was clearly perceived as gendered and raced by many of the congresswomen interviewed. More importantly, it illustrates just one of several ways in which researchers have documented the effects of the transition of party control on women's substantive representation in Congress. The all-important committee leadership positions switched, making it even more difficult to find a sympathetic ear. But as Dodson (2005, 138)

points out, “equally important was the concentration of the committee power most directly relevant to the substantive representation of women in the hands of conservative men.” Losing majority party status thus severely restricted the policymaking efforts of Democratic women, especially on women’s issues (Swers 2002). But gaining majority party status did not exactly free Republican women to take over leadership on women’s issues (Swers 2002, Dodson 2005).

Of course, conservative Republican women rarely took the lead on women’s issues, even before the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress; and moderate Republican women had long risked ruffling the feathers of the party leadership by initiating and supporting women’s issues, especially the more feminist ones. But as Swers (2002) so clearly illustrates, moderate Republican women (especially the more senior ones) found that gaining majority status made pushing women’s issues—and, thus, defecting from the increasingly conservative party line—much riskier. Much more was at stake for these women, including their own leadership status within the party and their newfound ability to pursue other district and policy priorities. Thus, “when moderate Republican women ascended to the majority in the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress, they shifted their resources from developing feminist proposals...to a greater focus on social welfare initiatives...[and] drastically reduced their support for liberal positions of women’s issues roll-call votes” (Swers 2002, 130).

In sum, the potential effect of party control on women’s substantive representation is not simply a matter of whether Democrats are in the majority, or how many women happen to reap the benefits of majority party status. It is also a matter of which faction within the majority party holds sway and how willing and able the party leadership is to exert tight control over its members, and the institution as a whole.

*Political Context*

Even though “various measures of political culture” are the “best predictors” of how many women get elected to state legislatures in the first place (Norrande and Wilcox 1998, 116), the research on women in state and local office has had very little to say about whether or how the “outside” political world might affect choices, processes, and outcomes that take place “inside” governing institutions. Rosenthal (1998) finds that state political cultures have no discernable effects on leadership styles. In her comparison of Arizona and California state politics, Reingold (2000) speculates that the more liberal climate, as well as a long history of liberal Democratic dominance of California state politics rendered that state more conducive to women’s substantive representation and the collective efforts of California female state legislators on behalf of women—despite their relatively small numbers and historical exclusion from state political office.

Ford and Dolan’s (1995) study of regional differences among female state legislators provides one of the most interesting discussions of political culture. Southern women, they find, have more political experience, are much less likely to identify themselves as feminists, but at the same time are more likely to list women, children, and family issues as legislative priorities. Southern women’s willingness to take on women’s issues runs contrary to both critical mass theory and common assumptions about southern political culture; most would expect the small numbers of women and the traditionalistic culture characteristic of southern legislatures to produce a particularly hostile environment for such gendered advocacy. Yet, as Ford and Dolan point out, such expectations are usually based on the assumption that leadership on women, children, and family issues is feminist and transformational. If leadership on such issues is instead seen as congruent with women’s traditional roles “as guardians of domesticity and the

sanctity of the family,” then the higher levels of such activity among southern women may make more sense (p. 345). This further suggests that the larger political context surrounding public officials can shape (directly or indirectly) the very meaning of women’s interests, how “women’s issues” are framed, and which women’s issues are more viable than others.

Not surprisingly, the comparisons of women’s policymaking in the 103<sup>rd</sup> and 104<sup>th</sup> Congresses have a good deal to say about the impact of the larger political context (Hawkesworth et al. 2001; Swers 2002; Dodson 2005; Swers and Larson 2005). They leave little doubt that the increasingly partisan, polarized, and ideologically conservative political environment of recent years has taken its toll on congressional advocates of women’s substantive representation. It is that environment that produced, shaped, and reinforced the conservative Republican majority and its effects on the women’s issue agenda, the CCWI, and moderate Republican women in particular. But this research points to another very important dimension of contemporary American politics: the salience of the gender gap amongst voters and the issues, organizations, and movements thought fuel that gender gap. (See also Weldon 2004.)

The gender gap threat and the competition for women’s votes give both parties a stake in women’s substantive representation, and they empower women in Congress (and elsewhere) who seek to provide that representation.

At any level of proportional presence, external pressure enhances women’s potential for transforming these historically masculine institutions. Thus, substantive representation of women is facilitated not only by increasing women’s presence as members of Congress, but also by a strong and vibrant women’s movement that can mainstream what was once nontraditional, raise the consciousness of women voters and women members, and fuel gender gap pressures that legitimize women members’ contributions to gender difference in the eyes of male colleagues by making satisfaction of women’s political demands integral to the institutionally respected goals of reelection and maintaining (or regaining) institutional control (Dodson 2005, 134).

According to Swers (2002, 24), party leaders in Congress often turn to their female colleagues “to act as spokespersons on women’s, children’s, and family issues,” all in an effort to attract women voters. Yet, Swers and Dodson both warn that the power of the gender gap can be elusive. First, it only works “for those congresswomen who agree with their party’s position on specific issues;” those who stray too far from the party line will not be able to leverage gender gap politics to their advantage (Swers 2002, 29). Second, as the post-9/11 world so clearly demonstrates, gender gap politics come and go. As Swers (2002, 132) predicted, “the power derived from electoral sources such as the gender gap is highly contingent on the centrality of the group and its interests to the party’s voting coalition. As concerns about defense and ways to combat terrorism dominate the Congressional agenda, the ability of women to capitalize on issues related to the gender gap is diminished” (see also Dodson 2005, 137).

### **Concluding Recommendations**

There is much research to be done, once we acknowledge that there is some very interesting variation out there in the willingness and ability of women (and men) in public office to make a difference and enhance the substantive representation of women. I have offered numerous suggestions for what might help us better understand and, perhaps, explain that variation. At the individual level, we could examine more closely and thoroughly the differences in party affiliation, ideology (political and gender), race, ethnicity, and position power amongst female officeholders. We would also do well to think harder about the nature of constituencies and winning electoral coalitions, and women’s visibility within them. At the contextual level, we could benefit from more historical and comparative approaches that might account for the effects

of changes in interest group and social movement formation, public opinion, voting behavior, and issue cycles.

It is at the level of institutions, however, that I believe some of our most challenging and creative efforts could be directed. We could begin by taking a more critical look at “critical mass” theory and consider the numerous ways in which the gender (and, I would add, racial and ethnic) composition of a political institution might—or might not—affect individual and collective behavior on behalf of women and women’s interests. Could the effects be curvilinear rather than linear? Could they be very different for women and men? Could men’s reactions be contingent on women’s—and women’s reactions contingent on men’s? Might the behavior of “token” women be contingent on the status of other groups and interests with which they identify? Beyond questions of numbers and proportions, we could examine more closely the collective resources of female officeholders—how those resources are amassed and with what effect. And we should always keep in mind the very powerful ways that political parties and dominant coalitions structure most aspects of policymaking and representational behavior. Finally, we should be open to considering the impact of other institutional forces and characteristics, including: electoral incentives, professionalization, constitutional powers and obligations, procedural rules and regulations, committee structure, fiscal and budgetary imperatives, inter-institutional relations (between legislative, executive, and judicial branches), and inter-governmental relations (between national, state, and local governments).

Tackling this research agenda will enable and require us to build on many of the strengths of the existing research, most notably its epistemological and methodological pluralism. Maintaining an open dialogue with other subfields in the discipline—including legislative studies, state politics and policymaking, urban politics, and race and ethnic politics—is key.

Each of these subfields can offer additional theoretical, conceptual, empirical, and analytic tools. And each could benefit from a better understanding of gender dynamics, the politics of identity, and processes of group representation. The research on women in public office has also been quite successful employing a multitude of methodological approaches (from in-depth, qualitative case studies to large-N, multivariate statistical analyses) and measurement tools (in-depth interviews, surveys, legislative records, etc.). Maintaining that diversity of approaches and that large tool-kit is also key. Paying more attention to variation across individuals, institutions, and time, however, will require us to undertake more systematic comparative analyses and more historical or longitudinal approaches as well. Those types of analyses and approaches, in turn, would benefit from greater collaboration and coordination among scholars, especially when it comes to case selection and data collection.

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