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Campaign Stops

Strong Opinions on the 2012 Election

More Women, but Not Nearly Enough

By **Tali Mendelberg and Christopher F. Karpowitz** November 8, 2012 8:52 pm

THE Congress that convenes in January will include a record number of women: 20 senators and at least 81 representatives. Female candidates broke other barriers on Tuesday. New Hampshire will be the first state to send an all-female delegation to Congress. A woman was elected to the South Carolina Senate, currently the only all-male state legislative chamber.

Does this mean the next Congress will be more attentive to the needs of children, single mothers and Americans who are vulnerable because of low income, poor health and other disadvantages? Sadly, no. Our research shows that female lawmakers significantly reshape policies only when they have true parity with men. In other words, while Tuesday's electoral gains should be celebrated, we've got a very long way to go.

We recently conducted a study of women's participation in political decision-making groups. It is in these settings — committees, caucuses and delegate meetings — that women's presence matters, often profoundly.

Our experiment assembled 94 five-person groups and asked them to decide whether and how much to tax the more fortunate so as to provide for those with less means. We ran the study in two states: conservative Utah and liberal New Jersey.

Surveys have demonstrated that women of both parties are more likely than men to mention the needs of vulnerable populations when asked about the nation's problems. Women more frequently choose "caring" occupations and, within households, shift resources toward children more than fathers do. The most commonly accepted explanation is that women are more socialized than men to care for others.

To observe how and when women voice this “caring” — and when their voice matters — we randomly assigned 470 individuals to groups in which women made up zero, 20, 40, 60, 80 or 100 percent of participants. We assessed each member’s views before and after the meetings, and recorded who said what.

On average, women make up about 20 percent of lawmakers in the United States and abroad. We found that when women constituted 20 percent of a decision-making body that operates by majority rule, the average woman took up only about 60 percent of the floor time used by the average man. Women were perceived — by themselves and their peers — as more quiescent and less effective. They were more likely to be rudely interrupted; they were less likely to strongly advocate their policy preferences; and they seldom mentioned the vulnerable. These gender dynamics held even when adjusting for political ideology (beliefs about liberalism and egalitarianism) and income.

In contrast, the men in our experiment did not speak up less or appear to lose influence when they were in the minority.

In our experiment, groups with few women set a minimum income of about \$21,600 per year for a family of four — which is close to the federal poverty level for a family of four. But once women made up 60 to 80 percent or more of a group, they spoke as much as men, raised the needs of the vulnerable and argued for redistribution (and influenced the rhetoric of their male counterparts). They also encountered fewer hostile interruptions.

Significantly, they elevated the safety net to as much as \$31,000. The most talkative participants in these majority-female groups advocated for even more government generosity: \$36,000, enough to catapult many poor families into the ranks of the lower middle class.

In another study, we pored through a sample of minutes from more than 14,000 local school boards and found that the pronounced gender gap in participation shrank sharply when women’s numbers reached parity — a real-world confirmation of our experimental findings.

When legislators vote, parties and constituencies matter most — but gender ratios matter too. For example, analyzing the 1990 confirmation hearings of the Supreme Court justice David H. Souter, the political scientist Laura R. Winsky Mattei found that the all-male Senate Judiciary Committee, regardless of party, was twice as aggressive in

questioning female witnesses as male ones.

Some scholars, like Mona Lena Krook and Beth Reingold, have argued that increasing female legislative representation does not consistently lead to better policies for women and the vulnerable. But they did not examine, as we did, the potential effects when women are half or more of the decision makers.

It's hard to know when, if ever, Congress will be half-female. But Professors Krook and Reingold and others have found that institutional reforms, like female caucuses, can help integrate women into decision making. We also found that committees that vote by consensus give female minorities a greater voice.

We haven't examined the impact of female executives on foreign policy and national security. As leaders like Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir and Margaret Thatcher have shown, women in the vanguard sometimes act even more "masculine" than their male counterparts.

But when there are more women in legislatures, city councils and school boards, they speak more and voice the needs of the poor, the vulnerable, children and families — and men listen. At a time of soaring inequality, electing vastly more women might be the best hope for addressing the needs of the 99 percent.

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