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Gender, Race, and Office Holding in the United States

Representation at the Intersections

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1 Introduction

The Puzzle of Legislative Service by Women of Color

When they told us 1992 was the year of the woman, we didn't realize it was going to be just one year.
—Marie Wilson, White House Project, 2006

The election cycle of 2012 prompted political pundits, scholars, and the media to declare the potentiality of another "Year of the Woman," much like the one we had witnessed twenty years earlier. More women were running and, as the adage goes, when women run, they win. Indeed, 2012 did not disappoint. We saw an increase in women's Congressional office holding, and there was plenty of press coverage about the new cohort of female representatives. At the state level, however, we witnessed only modest increases, and these gains were not evenly distributed across the fifty state legislatures—some states realized increases in women's representation, while other states recorded losses.

Assessing the gender gap in office holding is not a new question. Women and politics scholars have investigated the phenomenon for more than four decades now at the local, state, national, and international level. We know quite a bit about the differences between male and female elected officials along with myriad explanations for why there are fewer women than men in our legislative institutions. Everything from campaign contexts to fund-raising to voter attitudes to institutional rules and structures helps explain the gender gap in office holding. In other words, the differences between men and women in politics are a well-researched, well-documented area of intellectual inquiry. What is also a fairly well-examined question is why we see a variation in female office holding

across the fifty U.S. states. It has been asked and answered by several scholars of women and politics, resulting in variety of compelling conclusions including psychosociological orientations among men and women, state-level contextual environments, and the institutional-level rules of the game.

What has not been asked and answered sufficiently is the question, Does what we "know" about women in politics apply equally to *all* women? The intuitive answer to this question is no, and in the United States, we have some evidence to support that there are differences regarding political party affiliation, political party recruitment, and where Republican and Democratic women are more or less likely to serve at the state level.[1] Political party affiliation, then, assists us in developing a partial understanding of why we see a variation in women's office holding across the state legislative institutions.

However, other important dimensions of difference among women have not been systematically studied in relation to the gender gap in office holding. For example, in the United States, race/ethnicity is arguably one of those significant dimensions. We have very little to guide our understanding of how the race/ethnicity of the female office holder corresponds to the conventional wisdom about where female state legislators serve. This is still an open question, and one worth answering because the gender gap in state legislative office holding is smaller for legislators of color than it is for white legislators. To say it another way, in 2010, of all state legislators of color, 34.9% were women; of all white legislators, 22.5% were women.[2] Why do women of color serve at relatively higher rates than their white female counterparts? What explains the smaller gender gap in state legislative office holding among legislators of color?

This book offers an empirical investigation of female office holding at the intersection of gender and race/ethnicity and argues that an intersectional approach complicates our understanding of where women are more or less likely to serve. I find that the conventional wisdom does not apply equally to all women office holders if we take the race/ethnicity of the legislator into account. The mix of demographic, contextual, and institutional variables most commonly cited

as explanations for the geographical variation of female legislators provide less leverage when applied to different racial/ethnic groups of women. Why? That is the first puzzle under investigation.

The second, but related, question takes this one step further and examines the smaller racial/ethnic gender gap in office holding. Why do women of color, when considered as a proportion of their respective racial/ethnic groups, serve at higher rates than their white female counterparts? My analysis reveals that the theories and conceptions that guide our knowledge about female office holding are distinctly different for white women and women of color legislators.

A few new questions emerge if the women of color are placed at the center of analysis. If women of color serve at relatively higher rates than do their white female counterparts, is it because they encounter a different set of opportunities or face a different set of barriers? Are they more likely to run for office? If we know, for instance, that (1) women face institutional barriers that impede their candidacies and (2) women are less ambitious in terms of running for office, then we might theorize that women of color face fewer institutional barriers and are more ambitious than white women.[3] On the flip side, we might expect just the opposite to occur. Women of color may face what has been called a "double disadvantage"—they are both women and of color.[4] Purportedly, they would face more significant institutional barriers than would white women and should be less politically ambitious. Yet, it appears that neither of these propositions maps very well on to the empirical evidence.

To be sure, there is a burgeoning literature that investigates women of color officeholders at the state level.[5] These studies seek to illuminate the experiences and decisions of women of color, an important area of inquiry that has received very little attention.[6] The goal is to examine the legislative behavior of women of color and how they view their role as a legislator, as well as their goals, agendas, and policy perspectives. Within this collection of studies are several that analyze the differences between men and women of color and how gender has an impact on legislative behavior—in other words, a *gendered* analysis of *race/ethnicity*. What we see less of in

the women and politics literature is a *racial/ethnic* analysis of *gender*.

The intent of this book is to provide just that: a racial/ethnic analysis of gender and office holding, guided by intersectional theory, utilizing the smaller racial/ethnic gender gap as the empirical test. It is the first book-length study to investigate how the race/ethnicity of a female state legislator informs our comprehension of women's elective service across the states. I seek to uncover an explanation for the smaller racial gender gap, identify the factors that might make the electoral environment more favorable for women of color than for white women, and highlight the core contexts and structures that are different for white women and women of color.

An intersectional analysis provides a more nuanced theory of women's office holding and amends the conventional approaches used to explain the gender gap in legislative service. I contend that the institutional structures and individual processes most commonly cited to account for women's low levels of legislative service do not account for the variation in state-level office holding by women of color or the smaller racial/ethnic gender gap in office holding. What we "know" about the gender gap in office holding at the state level, the conventional wisdom, primarily applies to white female state legislators, and I demonstrate how and where this wisdom does not pertain to women of color state legislators. This book attempts to build on the knowledge within the women and politics literature by offering an assessment of the geographical variation in office holding by women of color as well as their proportionally smaller gender gap in legislative service at the state level compared to white women legislators.

REPRESENTATION AT THE STATE LEVEL

Why should we even care about the demographic composition of our state legislatures? The unequal distribution and attainment of formal political power to certain groups has been a mainstay throughout U.S. history.[7] Gender and race are two such identities that have organized U.S. politics, producing

advantages for white men and disadvantages to others. Both women and minorities are historically disadvantaged groups within American politics: they have experienced legal, systematic exclusion from formal political processes, such as voting, and avenues of representation, such as holding office. And, although women and minorities are no longer legally excluded from formal political arenas such as voting and office holding, both groups have yet to realize proportional representation in comparison to their population within our legislative institutions.

Representation is the core of democratic theory, because it imparts legitimacy for our system of government and accountability for those that are serving as representatives. But defining exactly what "representation" is and what it looks like can be difficult. Hanna Pitkin defines representation as "the making present of something which is nevertheless not literally present."[8] Pitkin differentiates between descriptive and substantive representation as a way to mitigate the competing interests a representative might face. Descriptive representation "depends on the representative's characteristics, on what he *is* or is *like*, on being something rather than doing something. The representative does not act for others; he 'stands for' them, by virtue of a correspondence or connection between them, a resemblance or reflection."[9]

Although descriptive representation is about "standing for" the population, substantive representation, Pitkin argues, is "acting for" the population.[10] In the instance of political choices, she states, "We need [substantive] representation precisely where we are not content to leave matters to the expert; we can have substantive representation only where interest is involved, that is, where decisions are not merely arbitrary choices."[11] The question then becomes whether one can get "substantive" representation in an institution that is not "descriptive." For Pitkin, that is still an open question. Her main concern is with interests and the process and less so with the outcome—it is a representative institution if the process is democratic.[12]

Pitkin notes that representative government should be defined as long-term, systematic arrangements that impart regular, systematic responsiveness. She contends that a representative

government has to demonstrate that its subjects have control over what it does. In other words, *the people* act through their government and are not merely passive recipients of its actions. The *governed* must be capable of action and judgment, capable of initiating government activity so that the government can be conceived as responding to them.

When people do not feel as if they are a part of these institutions, they are less engaged in the political process. Consequently, they feel less politically efficacious, they participate less in politics, and they are less informed about the political process—government becomes less legitimate for them. Indeed, studies show that women and minorities participate in fewer political acts and have less information and interest in politics compared to white men.[13] Because white men are overrepresented in our governing institutions, one might reason that their heightened representation leads to their higher levels of participation and efficacy. The converse, then, would be true for women and minorities, for whom the lack of descriptive representation would lead to depressed participation.

In fact, research does document an increase in registration, voting, participation, information, and interest among women and minorities when they are represented by someone who looks like them.[14] Furthermore, when gender is cued in elections in the form of a female candidate or in strategies focusing on women's issues in the campaign, women vote for women.[15] Racial and ethnic minorities are also mobilized when a minority candidate is on the ticket as well as when a minority is in office.[16] Matson and Fine find that both gender and ethnicity serve as voting cues under certain circumstances, and Stout and Tate contend that "higher levels of efficacy are *the result* of descriptive representation, rather than simply being correlated with descriptive representation."[17]

Thus, women and minorities are less engaged politically at the individual level. But having a female or a minority representative alleviates this disengagement at the mass level. Descriptive representation of historically underrepresented groups, then, mobilizes these groups to become active in the political process, to be more interested in politics, and

to seek more political information, thereby enhancing the democratic process as a whole. To say it another way, if what Pitkin refers to as the "process" of government looks descriptively like certain groups, namely, women and minorities, then those groups are more engaged in politics, which means that they feel as if the system is "responding to them."

Of course, like Pitkin, some maintain that descriptive representation is not enough, and that what really matters is substantive representation, which may or may not be part and parcel of descriptive representation. What we find, however, is that women and minority legislators promote and follow a legislative agenda that corresponds to the differences in public opinion we see at the mass level. Women representatives are more likely than are men to prioritize, promote, introduce, and pass legislation that specifically attends to the social welfare of women, families, and children.[18] Similarly, the evidence on legislators of color suggests that the agenda of minority legislators specifically attends to minority interests.[19]

In short, the literature on the link between representation and political participation has established that (1) descriptive representation mobilizes participation among historically underrepresented groups and (2) women and minority legislators promote an agenda that differs from their white male counterparts. Because our government is a system based on representing divergent collective interests, then it is imperative that our governing institutions actually represent the entirety of public interests and identities. When certain groups, such as gender and racial/ethnic groups, are not represented descriptively or substantively, then we should be skeptical of the representational capacity of our institutions. In other words, if particular voices are not present at the table of legislative assemblies, namely, the voices that have divergent views from those that are currently holding office, then we are missing critical points of view from which our laws are constructed. If the preceding theoretical discussion on representation is true, then our legislative institutions are doing poorly in terms of women and minorities. Because we know that women and minorities are greatly underrepresented in our democratic institutions, we need to know how

our institutional and social structures support or impede the potential for their representation.

State legislatures are an ideal place to study this unrealized representation. Ford and Dolan suggest two reasons as to why research on women in state legislatures is important.[20] The first is practicality: unlike Congress, there are a large number of women in state legislatures, which lends itself to systematic study. Second, Ford and Dolan state that most "issues of direct concern to women are decided at the state level."[21] In other words, policies that have a significant impact on the daily lives of women are most likely to occur at the state level.[22] Of course, states are not equal in a variety of ways, which is exactly why they are primed for comparative analysis while still being able to hold the context of the nation constant.[23] Ostrander and Lien contend that focusing on the congressional level "does not allow scholars to test whether alternative electoral systems might enhance the elections of racial and gender minorities to governing bodies."[24] In other words, there are fifty legislative contexts across which we can study the patterns of representation among groups of women.

GEOGRAPHICAL VARIATION, THE GENDER GAP, AND INTERSECTIONALITY

To be sure, women have made substantial gains in elective office in the United States during the past few decades. In 1975, women constituted 8% of state legislators, and by 2010, 24.2% of all state legislators were women.[25] Despite these gains, women, especially women of color,[26] are greatly underrepresented in state legislatures in comparison to their population proportions.[27]

What is more is that women's office holding is not uniform across the country. Some states approach (or have approached) parity whereas others are struggling to get out of the single digits. In short, geographically, there is a variation in the rate of office holding across the fifty states for women. Table 1.1 illustrates the cross-sectional variation we see for female office holding for 2010 for (1) all women, (2) white women, and (3) women of color. The percentage of women in state legislatures ranged from a low of 10.0% in South Carolina to a high

Table 1.1 Percentage of Women, White Women, and Women of Color in State Legislature by State, 2010

State	Total in Leg	Women	White Women	Women of Color
Alabama	140	12.9%	5.7%	7.1%
Alaska	60	21.7%	20.0%	1.7%
Arizona	90	32.2%	22.2%	10.0%
Arkansas	135	23.0%	19.3%	3.7%
California	120	26.7%	14.2%	12.5%
Colorado	100	38.0%	34.0%	4.0%
Connecticut	187	32.1%	28.9%	3.2%
Delaware	62	25.8%	22.6%	3.2%
Florida	160	23.8%	15.6%	8.1%
Georgia	236	19.5%	12.3%	7.2%
Hawaii	76	32.9%	7.9%	25.0%
Idaho	105	25.7%	24.8%	1.0%
Illinois	177	28.2%	17.5%	10.7%
Indiana	150	21.3%	18.0%	3.3%
Iowa	150	23.3%	20.7%	2.7%
Kansas	165	30.3%	26.7%	3.6%
Kentucky	138	15.9%	15.9%	0.0%
Louisiana	144	16.0%	7.6%	8.3%
Maine	186	29.0%	29.0%	0.0%
Maryland	188	31.4%	18.1%	13.3%
Massachusetts	200	25.5%	23.0%	2.5%
Michigan	148	25.0%	21.6%	3.4%
Minnesota	201	34.8%	33.8%	1.0%
Mississippi	174	14.4%	6.9%	7.5%
Missouri	197	22.3%	17.3%	5.1%
Montana	150	26.0%	22.7%	3.3%
Nebraska	49	20.4%	16.3%	4.1%
Nevada	63	31.7%	30.2%	1.6%
New Hampshire	424	36.8%	35.6%	1.2%
New Jersey	120	28.3%	16.7%	11.7%

(*Continued*)