

HOW WOMEN LEGISLATE

SUE THOMAS

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How Women Legislate

Introduction

Have women in legislative office had an impact on political processes and products? And, if so, is that impact similar to or different from the impact of men? Whatever the impact, how should it be judged or evaluated? What information about the political, social, and cultural environment helps us to understand why and how women participate as they do? This series of questions served as the impetus for this book. The answers are important because we cannot fully appreciate the influence of gender in the political realm without them. They are also important because no comprehensive understanding of legislative behavior is possible if they are absent.¹ Finally, the answers to these questions are increasingly important because women are running for and winning a greater share of public offices than ever before. In the 1992 election, the number of women in the U.S. Senate tripled, and the number of women in the U.S. House of Representatives nearly doubled. Currently, women hold 20 percent of state legislative seats and 10 percent of congressional seats. The latest comprehensive data for women's share of local-level office come from 1985, when women held 14 percent of mayoral offices and municipal or township governing boards. With more women in office, any impact they have is likely to have meaningful effects on legislative life. Until these effects are illuminated and understood, no theory of legislative behavior is sufficient.

The literature of political science and gender politics provides only a small amount of guidance about how to study the impact of women in office. Because women have so rarely been among the political elite, most political science research, when it considered the role of women, assumed that the male norm extended to them. Separate investigations were not common. Even the gender politics literature concentrated on the gender gap

between women and men voters or their levels of participation in various political activities.² In recent years, as more and more women have waged campaigns for elective office, a great deal of work assessing their levels of success and its correlates has been undertaken.³ But little research has been devoted to how women behave when they win office. Gradually, as women officeholders have taken their place beside men, scholars have turned their attention to this topic. What we have learned from their endeavors comprises essentially three stages of exploration.

In the first stage of research on women officeholders, we learned about the sociological characteristics of women in office compared with those of men. For example, women tended to enter politics from a background as a civic worker or community volunteer. Men, on the other hand, tended to enter politics from a professional base, usually some sort of business career. We also learned that women often entered politics at a later stage of life than did men, because women often fulfilled responsibilities as wives and mothers first.

The second stage of research about women in office provided insight into, among other things, women's attitudes about their role in the political world, their attitudes toward a variety of issues, and their voting records. We learned that women officeholders tended to perceive themselves as hardworking and responsible contributors to the process but also as people who often had a harder time proving themselves as capable contributors. Women in office also had somewhat different issue positions than did their male colleagues: they were more supportive of women's issues of both a traditional and feminist nature. For example, more women than men supported state-sponsored child care, and a much higher proportion of women than men (on the state and federal level) supported the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Their voting records were also more liberal than men's, indicating a consistency between issue position and voting behavior.

The third stage of research on women officeholders is just beginning to take shape. The overarching questions concern the impact women have had on the political realm. While past work indicated that differences existed between how women and men in office felt and behaved, it offered little indication of what kind of contribution women have made to politics or how to assess that contribution.

This book is meant to stretch the boundaries of this third stage of research on women among the political elite. Its overarching goal is to discover what difference, if any, women's presence has made to the political process or to legislation. Further, if women have made a contribution to the process, under what conditions is it enhanced and how best can we judge that

contribution? The following section outlines the contents of each chapter and reveals the major themes of the book.

Plan for Analysis

The search for insight into the impact of women in political office begins in Chapter 1 with a journey through the literature (both scholarly and journalistic) about women politicians. What I rapidly discovered was that a variety of often unstated assumptions underlie the writings about women in politics. Because the assumptions were often contradictory, the conclusions reached by researchers offered little guidance into explanations of why women officeholders behaved as they did, how their attitudes and actions could be interpreted, or how changes in their behavior could be explained. If any of the questions that prompted my research in the first place were to be answered, I had to overcome the distortion of these assumptions and develop a new framework for understanding the ways in which women could have an impact in legislative office.

Undertaking this task of deconstruction and reconstruction was accomplished in stages. In order to sort the various assumptions about the behavior of political women, I first developed a typology of expectations—essentially a fourfold categorization that presents their essential components in stark relief. One dimension of the typology consists of attention to legislative procedures and legislative products. The other dimension concerns whether women ought to, do, or will seek to adapt to existing standards or reform them.

With typology in hand, knowledge of the reasons for its multiple and conflicting assumptions was my second focus. Of the three reasons uncovered, only one, societal indecision about the proper role of women in the public sphere, illuminates individual choices and collective action of modern political women. The extent to which women in the public sphere are accorded leeway in their actions has the best potential to explain their behavior over time. Moreover, this explanation is the only one with the capability of predicting future actions of women officeholders. Following this central argument about societal attitudes toward women's role in the public sphere, the journey to discover and to assess the impact of women officeholders moves from theoretical to empirical concerns.

The empirical exploration of the attitudes, actions, and motivations of women in legislative office begins with Chapter 2, which focuses on women in the legislative process. My central question is whether women

alter the way legislative work is conducted or whether they work within existing procedural modes. Analysis of women state legislators' backgrounds, attitudes toward the political realm, and legislative activities currently and over time is the basis for my conclusions.

Early on, women state representatives were reticent about speaking out in the legislative setting and were reluctant to jump forcefully into the political fray. Their participation levels in typical legislative activities, such as speaking on the floor and in committee, working with their colleagues, and bargaining with lobbyists, were much lower than men's, and they seemed to focus on solving problems for constituents rather than on legislative battle. Their backgrounds in community activities, the helping professions, and family management, combined with the discrimination they felt in the legislative arena, appear to have contributed to this style of activity. Women's dissatisfaction and discomfort with existing norms of operation did not lead them to alter conventional legislative procedures; instead, they withdrew from active participation in them.

As women legislators gained more individual and collective experience in the political world, their levels of participation in the range of typical legislative activities rose sharply. Again, however, the end of that participation was not revolution but adaptation. Currently, women's and men's activity levels do not differ in any significant way. Although women and men still bring somewhat different types of backgrounds to their legislative position, and while discrimination based on sex has not been eliminated, progress has been made on both counts. The result is that women have increasingly chosen to participate in all aspects of legislative life.

These changes over time suggest that the wider societal debate about women's place in the public sphere has affected the way women have behaved in the political arena. As society expands its view about the extent to which women ought to participate, women themselves have responded by extending their range of involvement. However, it is too early to say whether bringing women into the legislative arena will transform its mode of operation. Before women could begin to change the way in which legislative work is done, they first had to feel comfortable with existing procedures, to master them, and to overcome the effects of discrimination. If women's participation in legislative life does bring procedural change, it is a change that will have to occur in the future.

In Chapter 3, I turn from the legislative process to the legislative *product*. Do women work to alter the kinds of legislation emerging from their statehouses, or do they pursue legislative agendas similar to those of men (or do they withdraw from the process in another way)? Voting records,

issue attitudes, committee assignments, and policy priorities are the focus here.

Early women legislators had different attitudes than men toward political issues, had distinctive voting records, and sat on committees that coincided with women's traditional areas of expertise, such as education. Despite this, they did not withdraw from attention to bill introduction and passage, nor did they exhibit different sorts of policy priorities than men. However, current women legislators, despite pursuing the spectrum of political issues and sitting on the range of available committees, have developed their own distinctive set of concerns and priorities. Today, women legislators embrace priorities dealing with issues of women, and children and the family. Men do not share this priority list.

Once again, as societal views about the proper role of women in politics expanded, women began to embrace new possibilities for participation and contribution. Women legislators today successfully and expertly use the tools available to them to create public policy. What may be most interesting about their participation, however, is that while women use these tools to address the same public policy concerns as men, increased latitude in defining their roles has allowed them to go beyond those efforts and create distinctive priorities.

In light of the ongoing debate about women's proper role in the public sphere, it is not surprising that women representatives concentrate on legislation dealing with issues of women, and children and the family. Even though women have joined the public arena in increasing numbers and in all manner of occupations, and even though societal acceptance of women in these roles has grown, the debate is far from resolved. Society as a whole has not reached a consensus about how public and private spheres ought to be integrated and, in particular, about the extent of women's responsibilities to each. Women legislators face these questions at least as acutely as other women (if not more so), and they deal with those concerns by transforming them into public policy issues. Their efforts are ways to ensure their full and continuing role in legislative life.

Chapters 4 and 5 shift our focus from changes in the attitudes and behaviors of women legislators to how institutional factors interact with sociocultural variables to determine the type of contribution legislative women are able to make. First, the percentage of women in the state legislatures is linked to the extent to which female officeholders pursue distinctive policy priorities. Next, I examine why women have not altered legislative processes and have, rather, adopted existing tactics in light of institutional constraints on procedural and structural change.

More specifically, in Chapter 4, I further examine the argument that women legislators display distinctive policy priorities as their leeway to do so expands. In Chapter 3, I offered longitudinal evidence to support this argument; in Chapter 4, I use a cross-sectional approach, exploring whether the proportion of women in state legislatures is related to the extent to which they pursue distinctive policy priorities. Evidence suggests that support for female officeholders and their unique perspectives is related to women reaching a critical mass in any given legislature. Once that critical mass is reached, not only are women more likely to pursue their distinctive priorities, but they also begin to influence male colleagues to pursue similar interests in the places where women are most numerous and most organized.

In Chapter 5, I explore additional reasons why women's initial resistance to or distance from routine legislative activities resulted in their gradual adaptation to the process rather than reform of it. Even when individuals or groups within organizations have goals for change (even very clear-cut or strongly advocated goals), institutional factors condition whether and how those goals will be accomplished. As the recent history of reform of the U.S. Congress illustrates, efforts to modify or transform structures and rules are particularly vulnerable to institutional resistance, and only concerted effort by a core of the institution is likely to result in any level of success. Under these circumstances, it is easy to understand why women's behavior changed in the direction it did. Their adoption of existing procedures reflects, at the very least, the odds against any successful reform effort and the costs of launching one. This analysis does not suggest, however, that procedural reform is not part of women legislators' plans for the future.

In Chapter 6, I return to the overarching, guiding questions of this research study: what is the impact of women legislators on policy and process, and how should we evaluate their contributions to legislative life? I argue that, based on their fulfillment of many individual, group-based, policy, and procedural goals, women have had both a substantial and distinctive impact on the political arena. Indeed, the fact that women have been able to make an impact so significant in a relatively short period of time and under difficult conditions may be viewed as heartening to those who wish to see women's contributions as substantive as well as symbolic.

The conclusion to the book, Chapter 7, moves beyond what we currently know about the attitudes and actions of women legislators to muse about their future and the challenges that face them. Whether women join the mainstream of legislative politics depends first on how they transform it.

1

Expectations and Nature

The basic discovery about any people is the discovery of the relationship between its men and women.

PEARL S. BUCK

The current state of our knowledge about women in office is limited and inconclusive. What has been written—by both social scientists and journalists—is for the most part unsystematic, and a great deal of it is contradictory. Underlying the findings of most articles or books on the subject are a number of assumptions, usually unstated, about how the influence of femaleness impels women to act in the political realm. The problem is that no two authors agree about what this impact is, nor do most of them acknowledge possibilities other than those that formed the basis of their own work. Little if any analysis testing various assumptions or predictions has been offered.

The principal conflict is whether the perspective of women politicians will, for whatever reasons, be similar to or different from that of men. If different, bringing women into politics has the potential to usher in new ways of doing things or new things to do. If not, politics, with the increased inclusion of women, proceeds as usual. Without agreement by researchers about the nature or direction of the impact of women on the political realm, and without the testing of alternative hypotheses or the development of concrete theoretical arguments from which to base predictions or analyze results, the literature sends mixed messages about the behavior and motivations of women in office.

Some of the writing starts with the presumption that, as a result of bringing more women into political office, the very process by which business is conducted will be altered. Invariably, these articles suggest that women will reform political procedures to make them more humane, more cooperative, less cutthroat. Other writing about women in politics suggests that women keep their eyes trained on different sorts of legislative goals

than men, either traditional goals, such as a focus on education or health and welfare, or feminist concerns, such as comparable worth or government-sponsored child care. Finally, a much smaller group of writings adamantly asserts that any expectations that women, as they move into the mainstream of political life, will be any different from men are naive and ill-considered. Women are required to operate within the boundaries of legislative norms in order to succeed and prosper, and they will, out of necessity and desire, meet these requirements.

Given the diversity of expectations about political women, it is not surprising that the literature on women officeholders is contradictory and lacks a clear set of conclusions about their attitudes and actions. My first step, therefore, is to organize the often tacit assumptions about how women behave in political environments and search for what is behind them. Only then can we develop a theoretical and empirical framework from which to launch a fresh investigation of the political impact of women.

Expectations about political women can be organized along two principal dimensions (see Table 1.1). The first is whether women adapt to existing political practices or reform them. The other dimension focuses on legislative products or outcomes—the bills that emerge from the process and whether they ought to reflect different concerns or maintain existing legislative agendas.¹

The procedural half of the typology contains two opposing perspectives about how women react to existing legislative practices. Interestingly, both sides rely on the fact that women collectively have little elite-level political experience. One side consists of those who argue that women, accustomed to the nurturant life of home and hearth, abjure the coarser aspects of legislative life, such as arm-twisting and logrolling, and seek a reformed process. As Barbara Ehrenreich put it, “We imagined women storming male strongholds and, once inside, becoming change agents, role models, whistle-blowers. The hand that rocks the cradle was sure to rock the boat.”²

TABLE 1.1. Typology of Expectations

	<i>Reformist</i>	<i>Adaptive</i>
Procedures	Reformist Procedural	Adaptive Procedural
Products	Reformist Productive	Adaptive Productive