

Women & Power on Capitol Hill

**RECONSTRUCTING THE
CONGRESSIONAL WOMEN'S CAUCUS**

IRWIN N. GERTZOG

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Reconstructing the
Congressional Women's Caucus

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*To the memory of my parents,
Sadie and Benjamin Gertzog*

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Their taped conversations were supplemented by interviews I conducted with congresswomen and staff in 1993 and 1994, and between 1997 and 2003. (The names of representatives and staff who agreed to share their thoughts with the CAWP and with me appear in the List of Interviewees on p. 179.)

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—*Irwin N. Gertzog*

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Introduction: Before and After the “Republican Revolution”

This book traces the origin, development, and legislative contributions of the Congressional Caucus for Women’s Issues (CCWI), and portrays the women who, since 1977, have been instrumental in championing CCWI priorities. It also describes the shifting institutional and political environment within which the caucus has sought to exert influence, and analyzes the tactics and strategies its leaders have devised to adjust to environmental changes.

The most significant of these changes by far occurred after the 1994 election, when, for the first time in forty years, Republicans seized control of the House and eliminated the offices, staffs, and finances of twenty-eight legislative service organizations (LSOs), the Congresswomen’s Caucus among them. Denied the resources that had helped make the 103rd Congress (1993–1994) the most successful in CCWI history, caucus leaders scrambled to find alternative means by which to advance their women-friendly agenda. The task was daunting, and the 104th Congress (1995–1996) saw the CCWI falter and almost dissolve. The disparity in CCWI fortunes reflected in the 103rd compared with the 104th Congress could not have been more dramatic, and the consequences of these developments are still being felt in the first decade of the twenty-first century. What follows is an account of these changing fortunes—a description and analysis of how the CCWI carried out its mission before and after the “Republican revolution.”

* * *

The 1994 election for the U.S. House of Representatives was the most consequential midterm contest since the end of World War II, arguably

since the beginning of the twentieth century. The election ended forty years of Democratic dominance, and it installed a zealous Republican majority determined to enact a conservative agenda, change the culture of Congress, and alter fundamentally the way politics worked in the nation's capital.

The undisputed architect of this “revolution” was Newt Gingrich, a once backbench Georgia maverick who, after years of attacking Democrats, mainstream Republicans, and the House itself, became the leader of his party and Speaker of the House. The new majority seized its responsibilities enthusiastically, energized by the exhilaration of victory and guided by an unprecedented congressional party platform—the Contract with America—to which virtually all Republicans had sworn fealty in the months preceding the election.

For Gingrich and GOP leaders, the Contract was the centerpiece of their dramatic victory and the template for their governance strategy. It provided an agenda for the 104th Congress and served as the cement holding Republicans to a common purpose. It also represented a symbolic embodiment of the claimed Republican mandate. And because its ten “commandments” could be expressed succinctly on an index card, it became a theatrical prop that could be whipped out of jacket pockets and flashed before sympathetic audiences. Essential though the Contract was for mobilizing and motivating the new majority, it was only the first step in the drive to repeal New Deal and Great Society social welfare programs.

To enact the Contract in the promised 100 days, Gingrich and his lieutenants changed House and party rules in order to centralize power within their own hands. At the same time, they stripped the Democratic minority of resources that could be used to delay, dilute, or defeat the majority's initiatives, and they silenced or eviscerated more than a score of partisan and bipartisan LSOs that might stand in their way. These informal House groups were a particularly vulnerable target, and were eliminated soon after the 104th Congress convened.

The LSOs were made up of House members who shared common characteristics—ideological orientations, racial or ethnic backgrounds, regional ties, or constituencies with similar economic interests. Members of each met periodically to explore ideas, common problems, and lawmaking possibilities. They used their groups to raise issues insufficiently addressed by House committees, to develop policy expertise, to obtain voting cues, and to formulate legislative strategies. Among the larger, better-known LSOs were the Democratic Study Group, a collection of liberal and moderate Democrats typically numbering more than

150, the Congressional Black Caucus, the Republican Study Committee, and the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues.¹

The LSOs coexisted with a much larger number of another type of informal group—congressional membership organizations (CMOs), as they came to be known beginning in 1995. Among the latter were the Asian Caucus, the Conservative Opportunity Society, the Sportsmen's Caucus, and the Chowder and Marching Society, the last of which was made up of mainstream Republicans.

LSOs and less formal House groups served many of the same purposes for their members, but there were fundamental structural differences between them. Unlike the latter, the LSOs hired staff who were separate and distinct from members' office workers and who furnished research assistance, public relations initiatives, and communication networks. LSO members used funds from their employee allowances to compensate the groups' staffs. And their organizations were given Capitol Hill office space, furnishings, and equipment, in much the same way that members were serviced to run their individual offices. Other informal groups benefited from none of these perquisites.

Over the years, LSOs had been under attack, often because critics believed their use of public funds, space, and equipment was an unwarranted drain on the public treasury. Other complaints grew out of the parochial policy goals they pursued, and their readiness to serve as conduits for special interest lobbyists. The most penetrating criticism of LSOs was that many did not keep accurate records of funds raised and spent. Sometimes the goods and services LSOs purchased smacked of patronage, and had little relevance to members' professional responsibilities or to legitimate congressional objectives.

In spite of charges that they played fast and loose with public funds, LSOs managed to survive and even prosper through the early 1990s. They had been in place for a generation or more, they had become valued components of the House structure, and virtually all boasted memberships that included influential Representatives of one party or the other—and sometimes both. Democratic leaders, who might have viewed these groups as competing centers of power, were nonetheless willing to allow them to be funded. They saw them as instruments for institutionalizing and managing House diversity, and as instrumentalities through which Republican and Democratic backbenchers could blow off steam.

After Republicans seized House control, charges of fiscal profligacy would have been ample justification for reforming or eliminating LSOs. But the new majority also feared that these publicly funded,

well-staffed groups had the potential for derailing the Contract with America, and ultimately the Republican revolution. LSOs had championed affirmative action (the Congressional Black Caucus), more robust social and economic reform (the Democratic Study Group), stricter environmental controls on extractive industries (the Environmental and Energy Study Conference), and family and medical leave and abortion rights (the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues).

Gingrich and other Republicans realized that if these and other LSO issues became salient, alternative agendas would divert attention from the Contract with America, and the narrow Republican majority—the smallest House majority since 1954—would have difficulty passing Contract proposals expeditiously. Consequently, in January 1995, as the 104th Congress got under way, the LSOs were denied their offices, furnishings, and equipment. House rules were changed to stop members from using their salary allowances to pay LSO staffs, and the groups were prevented from charging members fees to support newsletters, information packets, and public relations initiatives.

The LSOs exhibited a variety of responses to the challenge. For the influential Democratic Study Group, the rules changes were a death knell, and some of its staff were hired by the Congressional Quarterly publishing company. Most other LSOs, including the Congressional Black Caucus and the Hispanic Caucus, became CMOs. Their members continued to meet regularly to discuss issues of common interest, establish policy priorities, and map legislative strategies. But as CMOs, they were deprived of permanent, stand-alone staff. Support responsibilities were now shifted to office personnel of Representatives who were named CMO officers. Gone were the research talent, the specialized expertise, and the institutional memories that had made the LSOs important policy entrepreneurs—which is precisely what Contract proponents intended.

These changes were particularly painful for the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues. The CCWI had risen from a relatively small, obscure coterie of 15 congresswomen and a single staff member in the 1970s to a visible and effective group of more than 40 women, nearly 120 dues-paying men, and a full-time staff of 6 by the mid-1990s. In the 103rd Congress, the caucus had for the first time established task forces on such issues as domestic violence and women's health. And it had worked with Bill and Hillary Clinton to promote a feminist agenda, successfully sponsoring family and medical leave legislation, appropriating hundreds of millions of dollars to finance research on diseases unique to women, and supporting abrogation of many of the anti-abortion rules adopted in the Reagan and Bush years.²

These dazzling successes in 1993 and 1994 made reverses in the next two years all the more dramatic. The CCWI went from a resourceful, aggressive, confident advocate for women-friendly policies to an understaffed, reactive, and desperate defender of the status quo. Its members suddenly found themselves working frantically not so much to promote new feminist initiatives but to salvage past legislative gains once thought to be beyond the reach of detractors. The change was so fundamental that it took more than a year for the caucus simply to recover its equilibrium. At this writing, it has yet to regain the full measure of influence it exerted before 1995. Nevertheless, the CCWI never stopped posting legislative milestones in selected policy domains, notably in the field of women's health, and to appreciate fully how it has affected public policy and congressional behavior, its history before as well as after the Republican revolution is worth exploring.

Notes

1. The group called itself the Congresswomen's Caucus when it was created in 1977, but changed its name in 1982 to the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues after it admitted men as associate members.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, the President Bush referred to in the Introduction and Chapters 1 through 6 is George Herbert Walker Bush, the forty-first president. The President Bush referred to in Chapter 7 is George Walker Bush, the forty-third president.

1

Origin and Early Years: 1977–1981

The Congresswomen's Caucus was formally launched in March 1977, but not before a series of false starts. During the early 1970s, several women Representatives, including Patsy Mink (D–Hawaii), Margaret Heckler (R–Mass.), and Bella Abzug (D–N.Y.), had independently tried to organize women House members. These earlier efforts had been stymied by a combination of obstacles, the most troublesome of which was the reluctance of other congresswomen to join such a group. Those who believed in the utility of such a caucus reasoned that unless all women were members, this legislative service organization (LSO) would not be taken seriously by key decisionmakers inside and outside of Congress. Critics would label the upstart group as “unrepresentative” or a product of “marginal” congresswomen.

Membership of the most senior congresswomen was especially important to organizers, yet three veterans who would have added the most gravitas to a fledgling caucus were the least amenable to affiliation. Convincing someone like Julia Butler Hansen (D–Wash.) to join would have been a major coup, inasmuch as she chaired a subcommittee of the powerful Appropriations Committee and had won the abiding respect of her colleagues. Hansen was sympathetic to the women's movement, but she was an integral part of the prevailing power structure, and she had neither the time nor the need to identify with an informal House group whose durability and purposes were in doubt.

Two other congresswomen who would have given the proposed caucus greater credibility were Edith Green (D–Oreg.) and Leonor Sullivan (D–Mo.). But Green was hostile to the idea of a women's caucus. She had been instrumental in promoting the 1963 Equal Pay Act, which mandated equal pay for equal work; in passing Title IX of the 1972

Education Act, which prohibited gender discrimination in schools; and in prying the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) out of the House Judiciary Committee, thereby forcing an up-or-down vote on the House floor. But Green believed that a congressional women's caucus would call attention more to divisions within the country than it would address women's needs, and she would have nothing to do with early efforts to create such a group.

Sullivan chaired the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee and, like Hansen and Green, was identified with important legislative achievements—particularly in the field of consumer protection. But unlike her two senior colleagues, she was openly contemptuous of the goals of the feminist movement. She was the only woman in the House to vote against the ERA, she urged the House to adopt a dress code that would prohibit women from wearing pant suits, and she insisted on being identified not as “Leonor Sullivan” but as “Mrs. John Sullivan,” a preference rooted in her conservative social orientation. Insistence on this traditional form of address may also have been related to her having succeeded her husband in the House after he died, and her desire to perpetuate his memory. Mrs. Sullivan was secretary to the Democratic House Caucus and she agreed to use her access to the party leadership to help Democratic women secure desirable committee assignments. But she refused to countenance forming a women's caucus.

Senior congresswomen were not the only women harboring doubts about the value of a women's group. Junior colleagues questioned whether such an organization could adequately serve a coalition of members whose political interests and constituency demographics differed significantly. They also disagreed about the purposes a women's caucus could serve. Some saw it as exerting a united force to promote unanimously approved agendas, others as a catalyst for processing and refining legislative measures, and still others as simply a forum for exchanging ideas.

Skeptics were unsure about whether concentration on women's issues was a worthwhile or even an appropriate investment of their time. Several feared that their constituents and future election opponents would question the propriety of a caucus devoted exclusively to women's interests. Informal House groups promoting economic, regional, or ideological goals were commonly accepted, and many of these groups already existed in the House. Gender issues, on the other hand, had not yet been given the legitimacy enjoyed by other socioeconomic concerns, and public officials in most jurisdictions risked election defeat if they were branded as “feminists”—a charge that could