

The Legislative Productivity of Congressional Women: Understanding When Women are Effective Lawmakers

As the 113th Congress begins, a record number of women will be sworn in as Senators and Representatives. While there is no question that there is symbolic significance to the increasing number of female members of Congress, what does the presence of 98 women in the chambers of Congress mean for politics in Washington? Newly elected Representative Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) argues that women have a different approach to policymaking: “the women, I think, are going to reach across the aisle a lot more. We’re a lot more pragmatic.”¹ What does this purported pragmatism that congressional women bring to the table mean for the productivity of Congress? In a forthcoming American Journal of Political Science article, Craig Volden, Professor of Public Policy and Politics at the Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy at the University of Virginia, Alan Wiseman, Associate Professor of Political Science and Law at Vanderbilt University and CSDI co-director, and Dana Wittmer, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Colorado College, engage precisely these questions as they explore the legislative effectiveness of women in Congress.

Previous scholarship has demonstrated notable behavioral differences between men and women in a variety of contexts, including their roles as legislators. In Congress, men tend to adopt more individualistic and competitive approaches to policymaking and women rely on more collaborative methods. Volden, Wiseman and Wittmer argue that the strategies of cooperation and consensus building that female legislators pursue may be valuable under certain political circumstances –specifically when they find themselves in the legislative minority. Members of the minority party in Congress are unlikely to see their policy goals realized without working across the aisle with members of the majority party. With this tendency toward collaboration, female legislators in the minority party are expected to experience greater effectiveness than their male minority party colleagues. On the other hand, these same consensus building strategies are not as useful to women in the majority party where they are already part of a natural majority coalition, and cooperation with the other party is not necessary to advance their agenda.

“... the women, I think, are going to reach across the aisle a lot more. We’re a lot more pragmatic.”

In order to test these expectations about the different levels of legislative effectiveness experienced by men and women based on their political situation, the authors utilize Legislative Effectiveness Scores (LES) developed by Volden and Wiseman for each member of the U.S. House that capture the advancement of the legislator’s proposals through the U.S. House of Representatives and into law. These scores are calculated for each Representative from the 93rd Congress to the 110th Congress (1973-2008) and are based on how many bills a legislator introduces and how many of those bills receive action in committee, receive action beyond committee, pass the House and ultimately become law. Drawing on these data, the authors are able to compare the average effectiveness of female lawmakers with their male counterparts while controlling for various other factors that might

¹ Parker, Ashley. “Day of Records and Firsts as 113th Congress Opens.” New York Times. January 3, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/04/us/first-day-of-113th-congress-brings-more-women-to-capitol.html?_r=0

influence a legislator's ability to move bills through the legislative process.

In line with their expectations, the authors find that women in the minority are about 33% more effective (in regards to their LES) than the average male member of their party. However, women in the

"The average minority party woman has 28% more bills reaching the House floor and 33% more laws resulting from her sponsored legislation than the typical male member in the minority party."

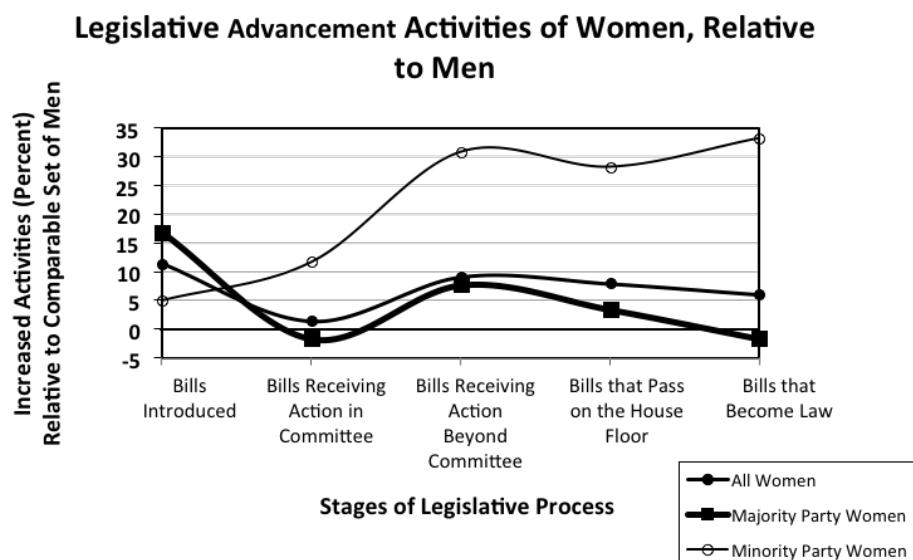
majority are not significantly more effective (in regards to their LES) than their male counterparts. The figure below illustrates the effectiveness of female legislators at each stage of the legislative process in direct

comparison to the men in their party. Interestingly, women in both the majority and minority party introduce more bills than their male colleagues. However, only minority party women are significantly more successful than their male counterparts in pushing their bills through the legislative pipeline.

Women in the minority also are better able to usher their legislative initiatives through committee and on the House floor, stages of the policymaking process that depend on coalition building. The average minority party woman has 28% more bills reaching the House floor and 33% more laws resulting from her sponsored legislation than the typical male member in the minority party. Women in the majority party do not experience this same later-stage success; instead, majority party women have nothing more to show for their efforts than their male counterparts at effectively every stage after bill introduction.

Drawing on their data that covers 35 years of congressional policymaking, the authors are able to observe the relationship between gender, party status and effectiveness over time. It is clear that the relative benefits of consensus-building politics have changed. Women in both the majority and the minority parties were consistently more effective lawmakers than their male counterparts until 1986. However, majority party women have been less effective lawmakers than their male counterparts in eight of eleven Congresses since 1987. During that same period, women in the minority party have consistently maintained effectiveness levels higher than their male minority party colleagues. These findings suggest that coalition-building strategies continue to serve women in the minority party well, but in the polarized environment that has characterized congressional politics since the late 1980s, such tactics are no longer useful for majority party women working to advance their legislative agendas.

Taken together, this research demonstrates that behavioral differences in the legislative styles of male and female Representatives translate to meaningful differences in their legislative productivity under certain circumstances. Bluntly stated, these findings suggest that engaging in consensus building can help female lawmakers achieve higher levels of legislative effectiveness, but only when they find themselves in the minority party. Hence the keys to female legislators' effectiveness lie at



the intersection of their behavioral tendencies (i.e., being relatively consensus oriented) and their institutional positioning (i.e., being in the minority party).

Increasing numbers of women in Congress are encouraging in many respects, resulting in a legislative branch that demographically looks more like the people they represent. These descriptive virtues aside, Volden, Wiseman and Wittmer's research points to how the relative impact these female legislators likely depends on their legislative strategies and their party status. The 113th Congress will see a record number of female lawmakers in the chambers of Congress and also marks a continuation of the polarized policymaking atmosphere that has

characterized Washington for the last 30 years. Currently, 58 Democratic women are serving in the House of Representatives, and, drawing on Volden, Wiseman and Wittmer's findings, one would expect these minority party women will be more effective in advancing their legislative priorities than their male colleagues. By contrast, the 20 Republican women serving in the House should not expect such an effectiveness advantage in comparison to their male peers. While the Democratic party would no doubt prefer they had earned the majority of seats in the 113th Congress, the sizeable number of women in their caucus suggests that there is a greater prospect for bipartisan coalitions than ever before, brought about in part by these female legislators. To the extent that women

generally pursue different policy agendas than men, this also means that the policies being advanced may be distinct from what would be offered in their absence.

—Claire Abernathy

Claire Abernathy is a CSDI graduate affiliate and a doctoral student in the Vanderbilt Political Science Department.

The research summarized in this policy brief draws on findings presented in CSDI Working Paper 4-2010, "The Legislative Effectiveness of Women in Congress" by Craig Volden, Alan E. Wiseman and Dana E. Wittmer:

[http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cmdi/research/
CSDI_WP_04-2010.pdf](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cmdi/research/CSDI_WP_04-2010.pdf)

"When are Women More Effective Lawmakers than Men?" by Craig Volden, Alan E. Wiseman and Dana E. Wittmer will be published in the *American Journal of Political Science* in 2013.

For further information about this policy brief, please contact Alan Wiseman, Associate Professor of Political Science and Law (by courtesy), CSDI Co-Director. Email: alan.wiseman@vanderbilt.edu.