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Do Women in Congress Get “Women’s Issues” Through?

It is no surprise to voters that bills addressing the classically considered “women’s issues” are more likely to be introduced by female members of Congress. Yet, bills on such issues are half as likely as other bills to be passed into law. Beyond that fact, the CEL has a further surprising and disheartening research finding. The likelihood of passage of “women’s issues” legislation drops in half yet again if the women’s issue bills are sponsored by women themselves. If men sponsor the legislation, the probability of success rises. What accounts for this dynamic?

The Center for Effective Lawmaking (“CEL”) recently released research regarding women’s issues and their fate in Congress. The CEL looked at 151,824 bills introduced across all major issue areas over the past four decades. By pinpointing which issues received more attention from congresswomen rather than congressmen, they identified six areas as “women’s issues”: Civil Rights & Liberties; Education; Health; Housing & Community Development; Labor, Employment & Immigration; and Law, Crime & Family.

Earlier studies suggested that both female and male representatives believe congresswomen have a better sense of how to develop policy in women’s issue areas and should therefore take point on them. But this does not align with results. Men are more successful than women in passing legislation in all six of the areas that are identified as women’s issues.

“The proposals of women in general (and for women’s issues specifically) are systematically dismissed and disregarded throughout the legislative process, relative to those of men,” states the paper’s co-author and Co-Director at the CEL, Professor Craig Volden.

While typically 4% of bills become laws, this number diminishes to half (2%) for bills specific to women’s issues yet then to a mere 1% for women’s issues sponsored by women themselves. These patterns remain constant across time, since the 1970s, even when controlling for other factors that influence bills’ success rates. The findings apply to all female legislators, regardless of political party.

This discrepancy in success rates could be due to historical assumptions that politics is a “man’s business” but is certainly related to gender gaps in committee chairmanships. Partly due to seniority rules, congresswomen are even more under-represented in these powerful committee chair positions than they are in Congress as a whole.

As the number of women in Congress increases, this research has many implications. Will the implicit gender bias diminish as women take on more committee roles, thereby leading to more women-sponsored issues making it to the floor? Will women continue to focus their efforts on traditionally women issues, or will male-led sectors like Agriculture, Energy, and Macroeconomics see more female-led legislation? How can women’s issues ultimately find the success they seek?

The Center for Effective Lawmaking seeks to advance the generation, communication, and use of new knowledge about the effectiveness of individual lawmakers and legislative institutions in Congress.

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