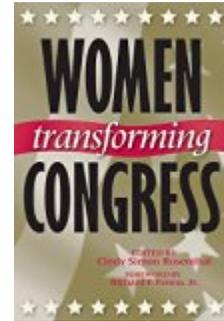


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Can and Have Women Really Transformed Congress? Assessing the Evidence

Can and Have Women Really Transformed Congress? Assessing the Evidence

In *Women Transforming Congress*, Cindy Simon Rosenthal draws together fourteen articles from twenty-three scholars into a strong single volume that belongs on the shelves of Congressional, electoral, and gender scholars. Each article assesses whether female elected representatives have transformed the U.S. Congress, and if so, how and to what extent. The contributing authors explore women's effect on Congress as an institution (e.g., committee work and floor debates), and policy agendas and outcome, as well as how gender affects their roles as representatives, electoral strategies, and legislative paths. The authors employ a variety of methodologies and lenses of analysis that, together, make this volume an excellent addition for those interested in both Congress and, specifically, exploring women's impact in and on Congress, the legislative process and policy outcomes. The contributing authors ultimately offer affirmative—albeit qualified—answers to the question of whether women are transforming Congress: yes, sort of.

Readers will notice several important and often overlapping themes that not only connect the articles into persuasive and supportive arguments that women are transforming Congress but also make this volume a noteworthy contribution to both gender studies and U.S. politics. First, drawing from Jane Mansbridge and Hannah Pitkin on representation, the contributing authors follow Susan J. Carroll in addressing both whether female sen-

ators and representatives serve as surrogate representatives (i.e., voters who share ideologies with a candidate but are not the candidates' constituents), and whether and how their representation is substantive (i.e., representing certain preferred goals), or descriptive (i.e., mirroring or reflective of constituent demographics). Carroll shows that because female Congressional representatives perceive themselves as surrogate representatives, "they bring something distinctive to their roles as representatives, something that most men do not bring" (p. 66). This distinctive "something" is the understanding that they share commonalities with all women that have long been under-considered (if at all) by male representatives. The female Congressional members' willingness to bring these experiences with them to the policy arena ultimately affects legislation, strategies, and bipartisan cooperation—thereby transforming Congress.

Katherine Cramer Walsh's research on how women's perspectives in House debates have enlarged women's representation furthers how we understand representation in Congress and fits well with Carroll's article. Employing content analysis of floor debates in the 104th Congress, Walsh captures how female Congressional representatives frame issues in ways that brought "distinct ways of understanding policy to the legislative process" (p. 370). These ways of understanding are "distinct" compared to men's; that is, due to women's different life experiences and expected cultural norms of behavior, Congressional women bring with them perspectives commonly ignored by the largely male body. Walsh's

work shows that because the Congressional women “represent perspectives that men seem less likely to contribute,” they have enlarged Congressional debate by utilizing personal experiences that most men do not have (e.g., child care concerns), and introduced women’s perspectives and interests of other marginalized constituencies. Female representatives have forced Congress to address issues and perspectives it has heretofore ignored; this, Walsh suggests, illustrates that women are transforming Congress.

Women’s success in forcing Congressional attention to previously unaddressed issues is captured in the article by Karen M. Kedrowski and Marilyn Stine Sarow. The authors address the significant increase of money between 1981 and 1998 spent by the National Cancer Institute on breast cancer research (from \$33.9 million to \$348.2 million), and prostate cancer research (from \$6.4 million to \$86.9 million). As the efforts of female senators and representatives turned Congressional attention toward breast cancer, breast cancer lobbyists and experts became frequent visitors to Capitol Hill; as policy attention to the disease increased, so did media attention and coverage. The increased public and political attention to the disease led to increased funding. Kedrowski and Sarow offer an interesting analysis both of the female representatives’ work and of the relationship between the increase in funding of breast cancer (a woman’s disease) and prostate cancer (a man’s disease). First, the female representatives not only advocated for breast cancer through various media strategies but created an institutional change: they “initiated the practice of congressional earmarking of appropriations during the appropriations process” (p. 241). Second—and importantly—“they motivated legislators to think about gender-specific cancers” (p. 255). This is indeed a significant transformation.

Another interesting theme is the effect of partisanship on any gender-related transformation in policy agendas and solutions. For example, using a multivariate model to study bill introduction and cosponsorship, Christina Wolbrecht assesses how female representatives contributed to the articulation and advancement of women’s rights bills over a forty-year period. She finds that that “even when controlling for ideology, women cosponsor more women’s rights bills than do men” (p. 184), and that “women of both parties are consistently predicted to cosponsor more women’s rights legislation than their male party colleagues” (p. 186). While Wolbrecht’s work shows that Democratic women cosponsor the most women’s rights legislation, she also finds that with two exceptions (1967-1968 and 1981-1982), not only

do Republican women cosponsor more women’s rights bills than do Republican men, but they cosponsor more women’s rights bills than do Democratic men. By their actions, both Democratic and Republican women have been able to shape and advance women’s rights agenda in the House.

Adding to Wolbrecht’s findings, Michele L. Swers explores the difference between female and male Congressional representatives in sponsorship of women’s issue bills in the 103rd and 104th Congresses. Swers identifies 510 women’s issue bills in the 103rd Congress sponsored by 195 members and 569 women’s issue bills in the 104th Congress sponsored by 224 members. She shows that “majority party status translates into agenda control, and all members increase their sponsorship rates when they believe they have an opportunity to shape outcomes” (p. 272). Nonetheless, in the 104th Congress, not only did Democratic women continue to pursue “feminist policy goals in a political environment that was increasingly antagonistic” but also “[m]oderate Republican women continued to actively sponsor women’s issue legislation across the 103rd and 104th Congresses” (p. 276). Even though Republican men, who “sponsor the overwhelming majority of antifeminist bills,” tripled their sponsorship of anti-feminist legislation from the 103rd to the 104th Congress (p. 277), women continued their work toward transforming Congress: “within each party, women [were] more likely than men to sponsor women’s issue bills” (p. 272).

In further exploring women’s success in transforming Congress, Anne Costain and Heather Fraizer show the importance of considering the effect of the women’s movement. They note that “many of [the women’s movement’s] successes and failures have pivoted around congressional action and inaction” (p. 70), and reach back into the history of the women’s movement to show how the women’s movement was able to “sustain both institutionalization and protest politics” (p. 72). Using content analysis to analyze a data set of *New York Times* articles from 1980 through 1996, they trace the role of organized groups in institutionalizing the women’s movement (e.g., shifts of the women’s movement from a social movement to interest group politics to a voting bloc), while at the same time sustaining protest politics in the form of grassroots activism. The authors find that through active lobbying, women’s movement groups had significant contact through lobbying and/or electoral blocs with the legislative and executive branches of government (though the closeness between the women’s movement advocates and the legislative or executive branch differed by issue

topic). Congress responded institutionally by addressing a range of issues important to the women's movement (e.g., reproductive issues, education). Yet as Costain and Fraizer point out, though the women's movement has to some extent become institutionalized (e.g., interest group organizations, lobbying techniques, etc.), as it continues to rely on protest and grassroots mobilization the movement has not become moribund and thus remains a vital force for change.

Another reoccurring theme is how the institutional design of the House of Representatives and the Senate within the U.S. political system limits all but incremental change in Congress and how this affects women's legislative abilities and strategies as transforming agents of change. Laura W. Arnold and Barbara M. King examine the 103rd through 106th Congresses to determine whether the unusually prestigious committee assignments given the newly elected female Senators in the 103rd Congress effected any substantial institutional change. They find, however, that despite the unprecedented placement of junior female senators on the "Big Four" committees (Appropriations, Armed Services, Finance, and Foreign Relations)—committees with significant institutional power where representatives could advance women's interest issues—no lasting institutional change came about. Rather, by the 106th Congress, "though the number of women in the Senate remained steady," the "overall breadth of representation had decreased" (p. 309). Arnold and King are not surprised; they note that "[f]or membership changes to successfully challenge existing traditions and norms, they must be accompanied by changes in the institutional structure or rules" (pp. 310-311). They add, "Although representation breadth is notable, as is the institutional power of some women senators, no institutional practices have been set into place to compensate for the lacking descriptive presence needed to secure the substantive representation of women" (p. 311).

Joyce Gelb takes a clear step toward addressing the necessity of institutional change. In her comparison of Britain to the United States, Gelb explores the 1997 election of Labourite Tony Blair that was accompanied by an unprecedented number of female members of parliament to the House of Commons. She notes that numerical gain for women MPs ultimately resulted in institutional change both in "terms of party culture and future electoral gains for women" (p. 422). Pointing to the 1992 election in the United States, Gelb predicts that a similar and "fundamental" (p. 423) institutional change is unlikely in the United States. She believes the usual array of

institutional suspects adversely affecting women's political opportunities in the United States (e.g., interest group politics, the incumbency factor, weak parties, candidate-centered nominations and elections, and a lack of powerful leadership positions) prevent similar gains made by women MPs in Britain's House of Commons. Yet despite the gloomy prediction, Gelb points to the changes women have managed to effect both in the U.S. Congress and on its legislative outcomes, and suggests that the U.S. "incrementalism can be as significant, if not more so, than giant strides forward at the polls" (p. 441).

Noelle H. Norton is a little more hopeful of women's successful negotiation of Congress's institutional structures. Once again targeting the import of committee position, she shows how "women have become strategic actors within the institutional power structure of Congress and can more readily influence policy outcome on women's issues" (p. 317). Norton focuses on female representatives' representation on committees with jurisdiction over reproductive policy between 1969 and 1992 and shows that the highest percentage of women on one of these committees was 2.1 percent; this changed in 1993. For the 103rd through 105th Congresses, women made up between 3.5 and 5 percent of these committees. Women also made gains in both numbers and seniority on related subcommittees after the 103rd Congress, which allowed them "the ability to write a policy in subcommittee, amend a policy at a full committee meeting, manage a bill on the floor as a key member of the subcommittee, offer amendments on the floor without facing a series of restrictive amending rules designed to benefit committee members, and exercise influence inside conference committees" (p. 332). Norton finds that the likelihood of success with regard to reproductive policy legislation is correlated to the number of women committee participants. Norton points out, however, that the legislative success of women influencing reproductive policy was not sustained in the 107th Congress.

Though many of the articles focus on the influence of elected officials, the volume includes an essay that explores the influence of non-elected political players: congressional staffers. Cindy Simon Rosenthal and Lauren Cohen Bell gather and examine data on the gender, age, and staff position of committee staffers for twenty-two Congressional committees between 1980 and 1999. First, the authors find that female and male staffers spent a similar amount of time on the Hill though in slightly different paths; they do not find any significant difference in professional preparation either. Rosenthal and Bell do find, however, that "the difference in percentage

of women working for women's issues committees compared with other committees is statistically significant in every Congress, except the 101st" (p. 350). Their research also indicates that a female staff director hires more female committee professionals than a male staff director. The critical question, however, is whether this bias positively affects policy representation; the authors answer yes and no. The authors conclude that sometimes staffers can actively and substantively represent women's interests, optimally "(1) when interest groups *demand* or expect a level of passive representation on an issue; (2) when a staff member possesses the necessary *resources* of interest, expertise, and status; and (3) when the *opportunity* structure of member-staff relations, staff autonomy, and political salience coincide" (emphasis in original, p. 355). Thus several important factors must come into play—status, interest, and expertise of the staffer combined with policy opportunity structure—before the female staffers can effect gendered change.

No anthology of Congress would, of course, be complete without an exploration of electoral strategies, and several articles in the volume explore how women have affected or changed Congressional electoral campaigns. Irwin N. Gertzog charts how women's pathways (i.e., their background characteristics and approaches) to the House of Representatives have changed between 1916 and 2000. Women, he finds, are increasingly likely to be *strategic politicians* and increasingly less likely—despite the succession of Mary Bono, Lois Capps, and JoAnn Emerson to their husbands' positions—to be politically inexperienced (e.g., newly widowed wives of representatives who fill in for their husbands). Gertzog points out interesting changes in women's pathways to the House. For example, for an array of reasons (e.g., fewer congressmen die in office, increasing percentage of elected female representatives), "the *percentage* of congressmen who are being replaced on the ballot by spouses following their deaths is as high as it has ever been, about one in four,... but the *number* of women given an opportunity to take this route to the House is declining" (emphasis in original, p. 99). Further, as the number of non-incumbent women elected to the House has increased over this time period, the percentage of female representatives elected who were social, economic, and political elites due to connections by family or marriage has decreased from 86 percent between 1916 and 1940 to 13 percent between 1984 and 2000 (p. 101). Instead, female politicians are increasingly strategic: ambitious, skillful, calculating, rational, and resourceful candidates with increasing levels of experience as professional politicians;

strategic African-American female candidates have extremely high rates of electoral success. While employing strategic political paths seems to have contributed to women's higher rate of electoral success, Gertzog points out a downside: "the increasing number of feminists who are also strategic politicians has had the effect of atrophying the informal House group [i.e., the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues] most devoted to women's interests" (p. 115).

Focusing on Senate campaigns, Dianne Bystrom and Linda Lee Kaid examine whether and, if so, how women have transformed Senatorial campaign communication—an increasingly important issue as campaigns become increasingly less party- and more candidate-centered. The authors investigate the "'videostyle'—the verbal, nonverbal, and production content" (p. 149) of the 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, and 1998 Senate races. With regard to the verbal content, for instance, the authors find an increasing use of negative attack ads by women candidates in Senate campaigns—exceeding, in fact, the male candidates' use of negative ads. Unlike male candidates' negative ads, however, female candidates were more likely to attack issue positions, not image. Interestingly, Bystrom and Kaid also find that men's focus on issues has decreased markedly: in the 1990-93 Senate races, male candidates focused 72 percent of their commercials on issues but only 27 percent in 1998. While female candidates' focus has also decreased during that same period, the decrease has not been as steep (i.e., from 67 percent to 53 percent). Through the lenses of verbal, nonverbal, and production content, the authors show that women's increasing participation in formal politics has contributed to a decreasing gap between women's and men's campaign strategies and style—both, for instance, by male candidates' cooptation of "women's styles" and by women campaigning more "like men" (e.g., through image or argument); they are "impacting each other's communication styles and strategies, both in the context of election years and over the course of the 1990s" (p. 167).

Balancing their family and political lives has crucial implications for female Congressional candidates, both in regard to campaigning and in tenure in office. Sue Thomas, Rebekah Herrick, and Matthew Braunstein use survey research to explore whether "there are ways to reconfigure underlying assumptions and cultural values about public/private sphere responsibility" (p. 401). The authors drew on three data sources: a survey of women and men of 15 state legislatures (399 women and 584 men), a 1999 survey of former Congressional representatives, and survey-interviews with 6 current Congress-

sional members. The authors find that “while societal expectations have changed with respect to women’s presence in the public sphere and the political world in particular, adjustments in attitudes and behaviors about the private sphere have not occurred at the same pace.... Women can join the public sphere, but it usually requires them to perform double duty. Men can do more at home, but not usually at the expense of going full tilt at work” (p. 409). Their conclusions are important and timely as many people are quick to point to women’s increased participation in the labor force as evidence of women’s equality and suggest that if women are not succeeding in politics, it is simply because they are unable to play the game. The authors note, however, that women seem to “have learned to adapt to both the private and public worlds and to succeed in both. The larger questions may be what these differences signal about the price for success and the structure of the public sphere more generally” (p. 416).

If societal expectations have indeed changed toward women as candidates, it is also important to assess how much has indeed changed and in what direction. Richard E. Matland and David C. King explore whether and, if so, how a candidate’s sex indirectly affects voter perception “of issues, ideology, character, or competence” or “may directly affect the vote” (p. 120) in primary and general elections. To do so, they use the results of the Republican Network to Elect Women’s national survey taken in December 1993. Though Matland and King note the strong effect of party affiliation, candidate sex still has an impact; Matland and King’s findings show that in a general election female Republican candidates for the House of Representatives have an advantage with Democrats and Independents as compared to male Republican candidates. Democrats and Independents are more likely to view the female Republican candidate positively, and female candidates look atypical compared to male candidates and thus are “more convincing [agents] of change.” Matland and King conclude: “women are consistently advantaged by their gender, when being evaluated from the perspective of Democrats and Independents” (p. 133). Thus, Democrats and Independents may provide sufficient swing vote weight to tip a general election in favor of a Republican female in a competitive House race. This leads the authors to suggest that the “the Republican party would advantage itself by running more women candidates” (p. 133) in a general election. When the authors switched their examination from general elections to primary elections, however, they found that being a female may be a disadvantage for female Republican candi-

dates: the “stronger” a Republican, the less supportive the voter is for a female Republican candidate. Thus, though a Republican woman may have an electoral advantage in a general election, her biggest challenge may be winning a primary.

This book makes strong contributions to the area of Congressional studies and gender politics. However, readers may note that the authors are too frequently imprecise in their use of “sex” versus “gender.” Early in the volume Georgia Duerst-Lahti focuses on how gender affects institutions; she argues “that gender analysis should be part of institutional analysis of legislatures” (p. 20). Gender analysis, which of course goes beyond using sex as a simple dichotomous variable, is much more nuanced and complex than the “let’s see what women are doing” or “add women and stir” approaches. Not surprisingly, Duerst-Lahti proposes “a framework that also includes gender ethos and gender power arrangements of Congress.... This framework includes an understanding of how gender operates as a protoideology to influence behavior, preferences, and policy choices” (p. 29). Understanding how gender operates as a protoideology and the relationship among this protoideology and Congress as an institution and as policy outcomes and norms/behaviors of its members provides a basis critical to understanding why women’s transformation of Congress has been so slow, yet this important theme all but disappears through most of the volume.

Despite the evidence the contributing authors offer that indicate women have indeed made a difference in Congress, the implications of the accompanying qualified affirmative answers (yes and no, or yes sort of) as to their transformative effect on Congress is important. Rosenthal notes that “[s]ignificant change in the gendered structure, the fundamental norms and practices, and established assumptions about legislatures and legislative behavior has not yet happened.” She admits that “the transformation has occurred mainly in the processes of representation, but not in the basic institution or its traditions” (p. 11). Thus whether and how women have transformed Congress invites a sort of half-full/half-empty response. That is, those who see the proverbial glass as half-full would probably say yes; those who see it as half-empty would probably say no. Even if women candidates are increasingly likely to be strategic politicians, adopt “male” campaign strategies, and sponsor women’s issue bills, they are working in an institution that from its inception purposely excluded the majority of citizens.

Duerst-Lahti notes that “[u]ntil such time as masculinist preferences are debated, women in Congress will continue to perform the masculine well—by necessity—if they are to be effective.... If women persist a new order can emerge” (p. 45). This strategy—women’s persistence—puts the onus of the responsibility for change on women. Given the political, social, economic, and institutional power retained by a minority of our population (i.e., white men), it is questionable whether women alone can transform Congress, beyond the most incremental of changes. The debate of masculinist preferences mentioned—for the most part missing in both public and political debate—may be *the* critical and missing ingredient of Congress’s transformation to a truly more democratic and equitable institution. Such a debate would be a requisite part of any sort of cultural change that would lead to institutional change and the “transformation of gender roles and social relations.” This, Rosenthal concludes, “will produce a consequent redefinition of politics and institutional life in the future” (p. 452). Without such a debate, any sort of radical (i.e., to the root) and significant democratizing change of and in Congress seems doomed to occur at a glacial rate, and it is questionable whether glacial rate changes are transformative.

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