



A longitudinal test of the gender turnover model among U.S. House and Senate members[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 November 2013

Received in revised form 14 February 2015

Accepted 14 February 2015

Available online 6 March 2015

Keywords:

Descriptive representation

Roll call voting

Women in Congress

ABSTRACT

This study builds on previous research by examining the impact of gender when predicting roll call voting behavior in the U.S. House and the U.S. Senate over several recent congresses. In order to unearth gender effects, it employs a longitudinal design based on turnover in the membership of both the House and the Senate. Through a comparison of the voting records of members of Congress representing the same geographic territory it holds constituency constantly while allowing for gender and party to vary. It does so with models including dependent variables that measure roll call ideology and support for women's issues exhibited in the voting records of members in both institutions. The results show that male and female members in each chamber representing the same constituency amass virtually indistinguishable voting records on the liberal-conservative policy dimension. However, on votes dealing with issues of concern to women, female senators tend to be more supportive than the male senators they replace and male senators tend to be less supportive than the female senators they replace.

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1. Introduction

As the number of women serving in the U.S. Congress has climbed over the past generation researchers investigating the ramifications of this development continue to labor to put in perspective exactly what it means for the substantive representation of women. Are female members of Congress behaving in ways that are fundamentally different from the men that serve in this institution? Scholars of representation have argued that politicians who are

members of historically underrepresented demographic groups such as women may provide substantive representation for members of those groups in the larger society (Mansbridge, 1999; Phillips, 1995; Pitkin, 1967). Much of the empirical research on this topic has been dedicated to examining whether such differences exist in the roll call voting records of male and female members of Congress. A substantial proportion of this research has concluded that such differences do exist (Reingold, 2008; Swers & Rouse, 2011). Whether looking at representation on a variety of metrics indicating how liberal the representative is on the ideological spectrum or on a specific set of issues substantively related to the concerns of women, a large body of scholarly inquiry documents that women tend to be more liberal than their male colleagues in each policy domain (Burrell, 1994, 2014; Clark, 1998; Dodson, 2006; Dolan, 1997; Frederick, 2010, 2011; Rocca, Sanchez, & Uscinski, 2008; Swers, 1998, 2002; Tatalovich & Schier, 1993; Welch, 1985). While this evidence buttresses the claim that male

[☆] An earlier version of the paper was presented at the American Political Science Association Conference, September 1–4, 2011, Seattle Washington. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive recommendations about how to strengthen this paper. Funding for this study was provided by the Bridgewater State University Center for Legislative Studies.

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and female lawmakers in Congress have meaningful differences on policy that are observable in their voting records, a handful of recent studies find that women are not significantly more liberal than their male colleagues (Frederick, 2009; Schwindt-Bayer & Corbetta, 2004; Simon & Palmer, 2010).¹ Thus there is considerable work to be done in order to clarify the dimensions of this relationship.

Even though existing research makes important contributions to understanding how gender may impact policy representation there are both methodological and institutional limitations to be taken into account. First, many of these studies may not have properly controlled for constituency effects in their models. Since female members of Congress tend to represent more liberal constituencies it is difficult to disentangle whether they are behaving differently on account of their gender or constituency effects (Frederick, 2011; McDonald & O'Brien, 2011). Second, most research examines representatives serving in the U.S. House where the institutional design of that body may not be conducive to detecting gendered patterns of roll call voting behavior (Frederick, 2010). Factors such as further tightening in the restrictive structure of the rules in combination with the escalating partisan warfare in the House over the past few decades make it a significant challenge for researchers to uncover significant gender effects on legislative activity in the chamber. Finally, many of these studies do not include a measure of support for women's issues where the differences in the voting records of male and female members of Congress are most pronounced (Norton, 1999).

This study aims to address the methodological and institutional criticisms that have arisen from the analyses of these studies' findings. It builds on this research by examining the influence of gender in predicting roll call voting behavior in the U.S. House and the U.S. Senate over several recent congresses. In order to unearth gender effects, this study employs a longitudinal design based on turnover in the membership of both the House and the Senate. By comparing the voting records of members representing the same geographic territory, it holds constituency constant while allowing for gender and party to vary. This study does so with models including dependent variables measuring roll call ideology and support for women's issues exhibited in the voting records of members in both institutions. The results show that male and female members in each chamber representing the same constituency amass virtually indistinguishable voting records on the liberal-conservative policy dimension. However, on votes dealing with issues of concern to women female senators tend to be more supportive than the male senators they replace, while male senators tend to be less supportive than the female senators they replace. The results indicate the impact of gender in the House is marginal, with male representatives

displaying only slightly less support for women's issues than their female predecessors.

2. Literature review

While the extant research exploring potential differences between the voting records of male and female congressional lawmakers has become more plentiful, there is no consensus on how to properly test for such differences (Frederick, 2011; Reingold, 2008). The customary methodological approaches researchers apply in a large proportion of the studies analyzing gender effects in roll call voting center around constructing a regression model, including numerous measures of congressional roll call voting as the dependent variable with gender as one of the independent variables, accompanied with controls for constituency characteristics, such as district ideology and many other demographic variables (Burrell, 1994; Evans, 2005; Frederick, 2009, 2010, 2013; McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 1997; McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006; Oldmixon, 2002; Swers, 1998, 2002). Many of these studies confine their analyses to a single congressional session while others pool data over several congressional sessions. The common assumption embedded in all of them is that constituency factors associated with a liberal voting record are independent of gender. However, the tendency to assume independence when women are more likely be elected in more liberal, more urbanized, more educated, and more ethnically diverse geographic constituencies (Elder, 2008; Frederick, 2009, 2013; Palmer & Simon, 2012) leads to a fundamental question about the findings of these studies. Are the differences in the legislative behavior these studies uncover attributable to gender, or are they linked to the propensity of female representatives winning elections in constituencies that are distinctive when compared to male representatives? Even with a variety of controls these models cannot account for the fact that the primary independent variable of interest, gender, correlates with the error term in these regressions (Frederick, 2011; McDonald & O'Brien, 2011). Hence, any attempt to disentangle gender effects from constituency effects poses a formidable challenge.

In order to combat this problem Schwindt-Bayer and Corbetta (2004) formulate what they describe as the turnover model of congressional voting. In their study of the relationship between gender and roll call voting in the U.S. House they control for constituency effects by evaluating the voting records of members representing the same congressional district in succession. This technique allows them to hold constituency constant without having to include any of the district level explanatory variables in the regression equation. Looking at 167 cases where one House member replaced another in the 104th and 105th Congresses they compare the roll call voting record of the member who replaces the previous serving member and calculate an estimate of how much more liberal or conservative that voting record is. Their model tests for the effects of both gender and party on House members' roll call voting behavior when they represent the identical geographic territory.

¹ These findings may hold up at other levels of government as well. Jenkins (2012) finds that "gender rarely exerts a direct influence on roll call voting" in her examination of legislators at the state level (415). Osborn's analysis of state legislative chambers also uncovers few gender differences in votes on women's issues (2012).

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