

Women & Legislative Leadership in the U.S. Congress: Representing Women's Interests in Partisan Times

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Abstract: Women are drastically underrepresented in American political institutions. This has prompted speculation about the impact of electing more women on policy and the functioning of government. Examining the growing presence of women in Congress, I demonstrate that women do exhibit unique policy priorities, focusing more on the needs of various groups of women. However, the incentive structure of the American electoral system, which rewards ideological purity, means that women are not likely to bring more consensus to Washington. Indeed, women's issues are now entrenched in the partisan divide. Since the 1990s, the majority of women elected to Congress have been Democrats, who have pursued their vision of women's interests while portraying Republican policies as harmful to women. In response, Republican women have been deployed to defend their party, further reducing the potential for bipartisan cooperation.

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In the spring of 2016, the public approval rating of the U.S. Congress stood at 17 percent. Congress has not garnered the esteem of even 30 percent of Americans since 2005. To find brief periods of majority approval, one must go back to 2003.¹ This disillusionment with Congress coincides with long periods of gridlock in which the legislature cannot seem to tackle the problems of the day, from the economic recession to foreign policy. Instead, an ideologically polarized Congress has continuously clashed with the administrations of Republican President George W. Bush and the current commander in chief, Democrat Barack Obama. These ideological fights are accompanied by brinkmanship politics, including government shutdowns and threats to block increases in the debt ceiling, which would ruin America's credit rating and plunge the country back into recession. In this polarized political atmosphere, can the election of more women to political office cre-

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ate a more consensus-driven and productive government? The emergence of Hillary Clinton as the front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination focuses more attention on the question of women's leadership style and whether expanding the number of women in government can improve the American political system.

In this essay, I focus on the advancement of women into Congress since the early 1990s and the impact of women on policy-making. My research suggests that electing women will not be a miracle cure for partisan polarization because the current structure of the American electoral system favors intensely partisan candidates. Therefore, women who thrive in a partisan context are the most likely female candidates to win elections. Yet women do bring a different set of policy priorities to Congress. Women are more likely to consider the needs of women, children, and families when developing their policy agenda. As women and often as mothers, female officeholders bring a different perspective to the deliberative process, improving the quality of constituent representation and focusing more policy attention on the needs of different groups of women, from single mothers in poverty to women climbing the corporate ladder. Thus, increasing women's representation in Congress expands the range of interests and perspectives considered by government leaders.

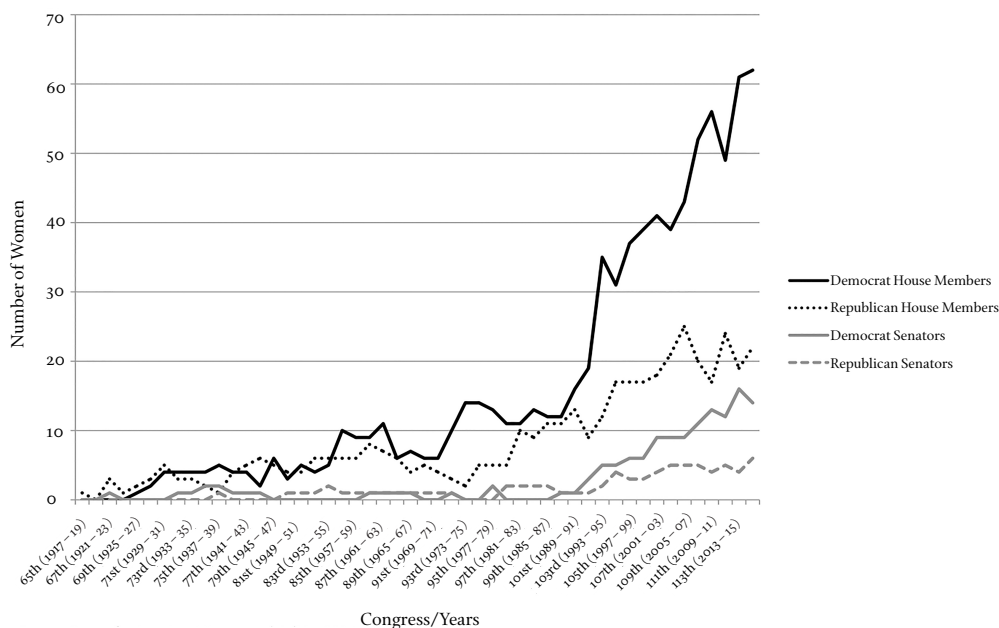
While women constitute more than 50 percent of the U.S. population, they are dramatically underrepresented in American governing bodies. Examining legislative representation of women, the United States ranks seventy-first among the world's parliaments and far behind most other advanced democracies. While women constitute around 40 percent of the lower houses of Parliament in Nordic coun-

tries, including Sweden, Finland, Iceland, and Norway, women hold only 19.4 percent of seats in the U.S. Congress and 24.2 percent of seats in state legislatures.²

Unlike many European countries that use proportional representation – where candidates win seats in proportion to the number of votes garnered by their party – the American system is candidate-centered. Congressional candidates are elected from single-member districts with a plurality of the vote. Candidates must raise large amounts of money to compete in primaries to secure their party's nomination, and then raise more money to contest the general election. Given the arduous nature of congressional races, the U.S. system strongly favors incumbents who have the name recognition and connections to raise the necessary funds and build a campaign operation to mobilize voters. As a result, despite the dismal approval ratings of Congress, incumbents are consistently re-elected at rates above 90 percent.³

Since the political incorporation of women has been a slow process, spanning the emergence of the suffrage movement in the mid-1800s to the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, male incumbency was already firmly entrenched when women entered the political arena (see Figure 1). In the early years, many women elected to Congress were widows, elected as placeholders to keep the seat in party control until the party elite could coalesce around a candidate. By the 1970s and 1980s, when the feminist movement opened more of the careers that lead women to politics, more women entered Congress as professional politicians. Still, these women continued to differ from their male counterparts in their occupational backgrounds and political experience. Compared to men, women in Congress were more likely to enter politics as community activists motivated by a cause or as local officeholders, such as school board members. For example, cur-

Figure 1
Women in the House and Senate by Party (1917–2017)



Source: Center for American Women and Politics (Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey), 2015.

rent senator Patty Murray (D-WA) began her political career as a community activist protesting the elimination of a preschool program. She went on to serve on the school board and as a state senator before she ran her first campaign for the U.S. Senate using the slogan “just a mom in tennis shoes.”⁴

The largest increase in women’s representation came after the 1992 election. Dubbed the “Year of the Woman,” the number of women in Congress jumped from thirty-two to fifty-four. To date, this remains the greatest increase in women’s representation in a single U.S. election. The advancement of more women into politics coincided with important changes in the nature of American politics and the relationship between the parties. These changes fueled a more partisan and polarized political atmosphere that rewards more ideologically driven candidates. Therefore, the

women serving in the contemporary Congress are more likely to be committed partisans than moderate consensus-builders.

The rising number of women in Congress starting in the early 1990s coincided with a heightened period of political competition in which control of the presidency and the majority in Congress was continuously at stake. In 1994, Republicans gained control of Congress for the first time in forty years. Since then, majority power has shifted among Democrats and Republicans and margins of control remain so tight that the opposition perceives the number of seats needed to win the majority as always in reach. This has been particularly true in the Senate, where party control shifted from Democrats to Republicans in 1994 and briefly back to Democrats in 2001. Republicans retook the majority in 2002 until Democrats wrested control of the chamber

in 2006, only to lose power again in 2014.⁵ However, for Democrats, majority control is considered within reach for 2016.

In addition to increased party competition, the parties have become more ideological, with the Republican Party more deeply conservative and the Democrats more uniformly liberal. As this polarization developed, a partisan gap emerged in the election of women to Congress. Before 1990, the parties elected small but relatively similar numbers of women to Congress. However, the 1992 Year-of-the-Woman elections really marked the year of the Democratic woman, since the number of Democratic women in Congress jumped from twenty-two to forty, while only four new Republican women were elected, increasing the presence of Republican women in Congress from ten to fourteen. Since 1992, the partisan gap has grown, with representation of Democratic women far outpacing Republican women.⁶ Of the one hundred and four women in the current 114th Congress (2015 – 2016), seventy-six are Democrats and only twenty-two are Republicans.⁷

This partisan gap in women's representation is larger than the gender gap in the voting population and reflects a divergence in the nature of the parties' electoral coalitions. The emergence of the civil rights movement and the adoption of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 precipitated a movement of Southern white Democrats to the Republican Party. The formerly solid Democratic South is now a Republican stronghold; historically, this region has also been less likely to elect women to political office. As the South moved to the Republican Party, northeastern states and urban areas became Democratic bastions. Over time, the districts that elected women tended to be more urban, more racially and ethnically diverse, and of a higher median income. In contemporary politics, these districts lean Democratic.⁸ Furthermore, the 1990s also saw the adoption of

majority-minority districts. To guarantee that minorities could elect a representative of their choice, minority populations were concentrated into districts that are more urban and strongly Democratic. The surrounding suburban districts became whiter and more Republican.⁹ As a result, the Democratic coalition in Congress and the women in the Democratic Party are much more racially and ethnically diverse. These minority members anchor the liberal end of the ideological spectrum.

Finally, the interest groups, donors, and voters that support Democrats are also more inclined than their Republican counterparts to prioritize the election of women to office. Women's groups and civil rights organizations are central forces in the Democratic coalition. These groups prioritize increasing representation of women and minorities in elective office. Women's groups, most notably EMILY's List (an acronym for Early Money Is Like Yeast), have developed operations to identify and recruit women candidates and support them with fundraising networks and campaign services. Moreover, the donors and voters who support Democratic candidates in the primary and general election are increasingly liberal. Liberals are more responsive to messages about the importance of group representation in Congress and liberal voters are more likely to embrace positive stereotypes about female candidates, such as that women are more knowledgeable about social welfare issues.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the Republican Party eschews identity politics, focusing instead on the ideological conservatism of the candidate. Further, social conservatives – a core constituency of the Republican Party – hold more traditional views about gender roles. Therefore, there is not a natural constituency of donors and voters within the Republican Party responsive to explicit calls to expand women's representation. While the party has made efforts to

recruit more women candidates and form donor networks that will contribute to female candidates, these organizations do not have the presence and donor connections that groups allied with Democrats have developed.¹¹

In sum, the modern American electoral system requires candidates to build a persona that can attract a highly ideological set of primary voters and donors. Candidates who excel in this atmosphere are more likely to be partisan purists than moderate compromisers. For women, the current structure of the parties' electoral coalitions favors the elevation of more Democratic women. Liberal Democratic voters and donors aggressively support the election of women and minorities who also hold liberal views on issues like abortion rights, while Republicans reject identity politics and do not prioritize efforts to elect more Republican women. Therefore, the Republican women who gain election must demonstrate their conservative credentials to their own highly ideological electorate.

Proponents of electing more women to Congress argue that because of their shared life experiences, women will better understand the needs and interests of particular groups of women. Moreover, they will bring these unique experiences to inform policy development, will prioritize various issues of importance to women, and will advocate for policy solutions to address these interests.¹²

Research examining the legislative activities of women in Congress from the 1990s to the present confirms this expectation. Particularly at the agenda-setting stage of policy-making, women are more likely to develop bills focused on the needs of women, children, and families. Examining the policy priorities of Republican and Democratic female members in the House of Representatives in the early 1990s and in the Senate in the 2000s, I found that wom-

en sponsor and cosponsor more bills related to women's issues, ranging from feminist proposals regarding equal pay, family leave, and reproductive rights to social welfare proposals related to education and health care. Women are also more aggressive advocates for these bills, expending the political capital necessary to build coalitions of support and move their favored policies through the legislative process. During floor debate, female legislators tend to discuss the impact of proposed bills on women and refer to their own personal experiences as women, for example, as single mothers struggling financially or as women experiencing discrimination in the workplace.¹³

While these general trends hold across time, the likelihood that an individual female legislator will advocate for a particular type of women's-issue bill is strongly influenced by the member's personal background, ideology, party affiliation, and the nature of her constituency. For example, one should not expect a conservative Republican woman representing a strongly Republican Southern district to support legislation protecting abortion rights. However, that legislator might advocate for bills to promote breast cancer research or curb human trafficking.

As more racial and ethnic minorities were elected to Congress in the 1990s, women of color emerged the most likely to pursue women's interest bills that target the needs of minority communities. For example, during the early years of Bill Clinton's presidency, with Democrats in control of both Congress and the presidency for the first time since 1980, Democratic women sought to advance abortion rights. Looking to leverage this unified party control into policies promoting reproductive rights, white female Democrats focused their efforts on passing the Freedom of Choice Act, a bill that would codify the right to abortion granted by *Roe v. Wade*.¹⁴ By contrast,

minority women were more concerned with access and costs for poor women, rather than abstract rights. They therefore pursued the goal of overturning the Hyde Amendment, which prohibits the use of federal Medicaid dollars to pay for abortions. Similarly, during the debates over welfare reform, women of color were the most aggressive opponents of the Republican bill, speaking out against what they perceived as stereotyping of women on welfare as poor, irresponsible minority women. These congresswomen of color voted uniformly against the bill while white Democratic men and women split their votes.¹⁵

The ideological and partisan profiles of the women in Congress strongly impact their legislative priorities and leadership styles. Just as the larger chamber has polarized, Democratic women are now more uniformly liberal and there are few conservative Democratic men or women. Similarly, Republicans in Congress are more intensely conservative. In the early 1990s, many of the Republican women in Congress were moderates who would work across the aisle with Democratic women on specific women's issues, including reproductive rights, women's health research, and initiatives to help women in the workforce. Indeed, in the 1990s, moderate Republican and Democratic women worked together to pass legislation that funded research on various women's health concerns, ensured that women were included in more clinical trials, and created the Office of Women's Health at the National Institutes of Health. When Republicans gained the majority in 1994 and promoted welfare reform, Republican women who held seats on the committee of jurisdiction, the Ways and Means Committee, convinced their male Republican colleagues to incorporate child-support enforcement and greater funding for child care in the bill.¹⁶

Yet by the early 2000s, electoral trends resulted in these moderate Republican

women losing their seats to Democrats. The new Republican women being elected were much more conservative legislators elected from the South and West. Indeed, studies of voting behavior demonstrate that Republican women in the House of Representatives were distinctly more liberal than their male colleagues, particularly on women's issues, throughout the 1980s and 1990s. However, by 2002, the voting records of male and female Republicans in the House were converging, and the current contingent of Republican women is just as conservative as Republican men.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the few Republican women in the Senate have remained more moderate than their male counterparts,¹⁸ though, following the 2012 and 2014 elections of increasingly conservative women to the Senate, even this trend may reverse.

Today there is little cross-party collaboration among women legislators, particularly in the House of Representatives. Under current electoral configurations, women's issues have become strongly associated with the Democratic Party. Utilizing issues like contraception and equal pay, the party actively courts women voters, particularly young women, single women, and college-educated women, to win elections. Indeed, in both the 2012 and 2014 elections, Democrats appealed to women voters by accusing Republicans of waging a "war on women" in which Republican policies condoned pay discrimination and sought to deny women access to health care and contraception.¹⁹

The fact that women's issues are a key element of Democratic electoral strategy means that when Democratic women champion issues like child care, pay equity, or reproductive rights, they are pursuing their own policy priorities and helping their party energize voters and donors. For example, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, the first bill signed into law by President

Obama, was a top priority for Democratic women looking to advance pay equity. Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), and Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) had worked for years to advance initiatives to combat pay discrimination. When the Supreme Court decided that Lilly Ledbetter could not recover damages from her employer Goodyear Tire and Auto because the statute of limitations to file a claim had run out, Democrats seized on her story to promote legislation that would reset the clock with each discriminatory paycheck. As a result, women like Ledbetter, who was not aware of the ongoing discrimination until a colleague secretly sent her a note outlining the disparities between her pay and that of male colleagues with less seniority, could now fight for equal pay. To build support for the legislation, the Democratic women of the House and Senate held press conferences, wrote editorials in support of the bill, organized speeches on the floor, and continuously worked to move the bill forward in the legislative process and see it through to law.²⁰

While the Democratic women were fully dedicated to the policy goals behind the legislation, the Ledbetter Fair Pay Act was also used as an electoral tool to highlight Democrats' commitment to women's economic empowerment and to portray Republicans as siding with their business allies over the interests of women and their families. First proposed in the 2008 election cycle, Senate Democrats used the debate and the vote on the bill to let Democratic presidential primary candidates, senators Barack Obama (IL) and Hillary Clinton (NY), make floor speeches demonstrating their commitment to women's economic needs, while portraying the Republican nominee, John McCain (AZ), as a business apologist unconcerned with the needs of women. Once Barack Obama won the nomination, Ledbetter campaigned

heavily for him and her story became an integral part of the Democratic campaign message. After Obama's victory, he signed the bill into law as his first major legislation, with Lilly Ledbetter and a group of Democratic congresswomen looking on in a visual that reinforced the image of Democrats as the party of women's rights.

In such a partisan atmosphere, Republican women could not collaborate with Democrats on pay equity. Instead, when Democrats accuse the Republican Party of being antiwomen, Republican women are called on to defend the party against these charges. In the Senate, Kay Bailey Hutchison, a Texas Republican who served in party leadership as Policy Committee chair, was the lead sponsor of a Republican alternative to the Ledbetter bill. She defended the party's position on the floor and pushed back against the characterization of Republicans as protecting their business allies and denying women equal pay. In the House of Representatives, conservative women voted against the Democratic bill, while the more moderate Republican women, particularly the moderates in the Senate, voted in favor of the Democratic bill. However, the Republican women who voted for the bill and supported the goals of the policy did not actively lobby for the bill by participating in press conferences and other efforts to build support for it; those efforts were wrapped in rhetoric to mobilize women voters for the Democratic Party and against Republicans.²¹

Similarly, Democratic women have long advocated for making contraception more affordable and accessible. President Obama's decision to pursue national health insurance created an opportunity to achieve this goal. Democratic women were among the most aggressive advocates for requiring insurance companies to provide free access to contraceptives as part of a broader package of preventative health benefits. Making contraception more widely avail-

able is popular with the public and reduces the incidence of unwanted pregnancies. However, the issue is also wrapped up in the contentious politics of abortion; it quickly developed into a fight over the need for exemptions for employers who have religious objections to providing contraception. Democratic women wanting to extend benefits to as many women as possible, including Senators Patty Murray (WA), Barbara Boxer (CA), Debbie Stabenow (MI), and Jeanne Shaheen (NH), aggressively pressed for the broadest possible coverage. Meanwhile, other prominent Democrats, including Vice President Biden, advised President Obama to create a wider exemption, fearing a backlash from the Catholic Church and antiabortion groups. Thus, while most Democrats supported including contraception in the preventative health package, Democratic women were more strongly committed to the issue and resisted efforts to scale back coverage. Ultimately, President Obama opted for broad coverage, precipitating an ongoing fight over the parameters of the religious exemption and who qualifies for it. To date, the administration has revised the rules numerous times, the Supreme Court weighed in and expanded the exemption to privately held corporations, and the courts are still considering other issues related to religious freedom and the contraception mandate. Amidst this continuing controversy, Democratic women remain among the staunchest defenders of the mandate.²²

As with the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, the contraception mandate is also a pillar in Democratic efforts to attract women voters, and the party uses the partisan battles over contraception as supporting evidence of the Republican war on women. As a result, Republican women have been called on to defend their party. Most prominently, Senator Kelly Ayotte (R-NH) has served as a primary cosponsor and spokesperson for a religious freedom bill, and has main-

tained that Republicans are concerned with protecting religious freedom, not denying women contraception. Most recently, Ayotte has promoted a bill with Senator Cory Gardner (R-CO) to allow contraception to be sold over the counter without a prescription. Gardner successfully used the proposal to counter the incumbent Democratic senator's attempts to portray him as damaging to women's health, and subsequently won his 2014 Senate challenge.²³

The sharp polarization surrounding women's issues has engulfed formerly bipartisan areas of agreement. Thus, while the Violence Against Women Act passed easily in the 1990s and was later renewed without controversy, the most recent effort to reauthorize the legislation was ensnared in conflict over gay rights and other issues delaying passage. The conflict followed the familiar pattern of partisan polarization, with Democratic women championing the proposal, the Democratic Party highlighting Republican resistance as evidence of the party's lack of commitment to women's rights, and Republican women speaking up to defend the party.²⁴

Still, when issues arise that disproportionately impact women and are not associated with the partisan divide, women engage in cross-party collaboration. For example, Democratic and Republican women in the Senate have aggressively pursued reforms to the military justice system to address the problem of sexual assault in the military. Pentagon surveys indicate that the incidence of sexual assault in the military increased 35 percent between 2010 and 2012. Moreover, only a small percentage of victims file a report and very few perpetrators are prosecuted. Incensed by the ongoing problem of sexual assault and the military's inability to address it, the women in the Senate sought to draw more attention to the issue and began crafting policy solutions. Because

seven women, two Republicans and five Democrats, served on the Armed Services Committee, they were able to convince the Committee chair to call a rare hearing with the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and all the uniformed chiefs of the armed services in order to confront each of them about the issue and what could be done to improve the military's response. The female senators then worked together to craft reforms, several of which Congress ultimately adopted, including changing the procedures used to prosecute sexual assault, eliminating the ability of military commanders to overturn jury convictions, and providing services and legal counsel to victims.²⁵

While the female senators agreed on the importance of the issue, they did not always agree on the necessary policy solutions. Indeed, the Senate was strongly divided over the question of whether the decision to prosecute a sexual assault should be taken out of the hands of military commanders and entrusted to independent prosecutors. The coalitions on this issue did not fall neatly along party lines. Democrat Kirsten Gillibrand (NY) – supported by most of the Democratic women in the Senate and two Republican women, Lisa Murkowski (AK) and Susan Collins (ME) – championed a proposal to remove this power from the chain of command, hoping to encourage more women to come forward to report the crime and to increase the rate of prosecutions. The Pentagon and the chair of the Armed Services Committee, Carl Levin (D-MI), strongly opposed Gillibrand's bill; in response, she worked diligently to build a cross-party coalition, even gaining the support of conservative stalwarts Rand Paul (R-KY) and Ted Cruz (R-TX). Meanwhile, another female Democrat, Claire McCaskill (MO) led a coalition working to keep the imperative to prosecute within the military chain of command in order to clearly delineate responsibility and pressure military leaders to take the

problem more seriously. McCaskill had the support of the chairman of the Armed Services Committee and the two Republican women on the Committee, Kelly Ayotte (NH) and Deb Fischer (NE). McCaskill's proposal was ultimately adopted, and efforts to improve the treatment of women in the military are ongoing.²⁶

Female senators' success in building bipartisan policy coalitions to force the military bureaucracy to change its policies regarding sexual assault was facilitated by the fact that women held a significant block of seats on the Armed Services Committee, constituting seven of the Committee's twenty-six members. Further, women held pivotal leadership positions on the Committee, including Kirsten Gillibrand's position as chair of the Subcommittee on Personnel. The advancement of women into congressional leadership is a relatively new phenomenon and raises questions of whether women have different leadership styles from men. Seniority is a crucial factor for advancement into leadership positions in committees and within the parties. Since most women in Congress today were elected after 1992, women have only recently earned the seniority necessary to attain committee and party leadership posts.

The partisan gap in women's representation means that women have greater numbers and more seniority in the Democratic Party. Thus, when sexual assault reforms were adopted in 2013 and 2014, Democrats held the majority in the Senate and Democratic women chaired eight of the Senate's committees, including the powerful Appropriations Committee and Budget Committee. In the current Republican-controlled Congress, women chair only one committee in the House, the Committee on House Administration, and two committees in the Senate, the Energy and Natural Resources Committee and the Select Committee on Aging.²⁷ Because most Republican women

serving in Congress were elected as part of or following the 2010 Republican wave, few Republican women have gained enough seniority to acquire committee chairmanships. As a result, when Republicans control the majority, women have a much more limited influence over policy.

Looking at the party caucuses, few women have advanced to the highest levels of party leadership. Women in both the Republican and Democratic parties have served in lower-level leadership positions, such as conference vice chair, conference secretary, and deputy whip. However, in the Senate, no women have advanced to the top leadership positions of party leader and whip. In the House of Representatives, only Nancy Pelosi has reached the highest leadership position: Speaker of the House. Republicans in the House have elected two women to serve as conference chair, the fourth-ranking leadership position that is focused on selling the party's agenda to the public.²⁸ Both Deborah Pryce (R-OH), conference chair from 2003 to 2007, and current conference chair Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA) cite outreach to women voters and combating the Democratic war-on-women message as among their top priorities.²⁹

Studies of the leadership styles of female committee chairs in the state legislatures indicate that compared with male committee chairs, women display a more egalitarian leadership style that values consensus and collaboration, while men adopt more authoritative styles that emphasize conflict and competition. However, gender differences in leadership style are less apparent in more professionalized legislatures: institutions that meet year round with a full-time staff and are likely to be partisan bodies in the mold of Congress.³⁰ Thus, it is possible that the institutional norms of Congress make it less likely that women will exhibit a distinctive leadership style.

Looking at female leadership in Congress, scholars who focus on legislative behavior note distinct differences in how men and women spend their time. Women engage in higher rates of bill sponsorship and cosponsorship, and when earmarks were still allowed, female members brought home more projects to their districts.³¹ Thus, female legislators are more active than men and are more likely to cast a broad net in their policy activity. Examining how far members' proposals advance in the legislative process, there are clear gender differences in levels of policy success. Women are more effective legislators than men when they serve in the minority party. As minority-party legislators, women's ability to build consensus and potentially reach across party lines to forge coalitions is necessary for achieving progress on legislation. However, when serving in the majority party, women are less effective than men as measured by how far their proposals advance through the legislative process. This gender disparity is particularly true in more recent polarized Congresses; partisan environments value confrontation over female consensus-building skills.³²

As perhaps the most prominent woman in Congress, former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi illustrates how a female leader can both bring distinctive policy priorities to Congress and thrive in a highly polarized and partisan context. Pelosi won a contested race for minority party whip in 2001. Emerging from the more liberal wing of the Democratic Party to run against Steny Hoyer (D-MD), Pelosi emphasized the need for more diversity in leadership and had the support of most of the women in the Democratic caucus, as well as the large California delegation. Rising to minority leader in 2003, Pelosi became Speaker of the House when Democrats took back the majority in the 2006 elections. Rather than someone who builds coalitions across party lines, Pelosi has been described as a partisan warrior

in the mold of Newt Gingrich (R-GA), the former Speaker of the House who led the Republican revolution of 1994. Like Gingrich, Pelosi draws sharp contrasts between the policy agendas of Democrats and Republicans. As Speaker, she pushed a strongly liberal agenda, and as minority leader in the current Congress, she prefers to force Republicans to find votes within their own party for must-pass bills before coming to the table to negotiate a deal. Pelosi is a prolific fundraiser and a favorite target of Republicans who characterize her as a San Francisco big-government liberal emblematic of the wrongheaded ideas of the Democratic Party.³³

Meanwhile, in line with research on women's leadership styles, within the Democratic caucus, Pelosi is seen as a consensus-builder who listens to the needs of her members and tries to bridge differences across the different factions of the caucus. She also prioritizes bringing more diversity to the leadership table via appointing more women and more minorities to chair committees.³³ Pelosi is strongly committed to pursuing legislation focused on the needs of women, children, and families. She played a pivotal role in pressing President Obama to make his health insurance reform as comprehensive as possible, rather than scale it back in the face of Republican opposition. As Speaker, she also pushed through an expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program, which provides health insurance to low-income children whose family incomes are above the poverty threshold necessary to qualify for Medicaid. Pelosi is a staunch defender of abortion rights and a proponent of equal pay initiatives. She helped convince President Obama to make the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act the first bill he passed through Congress and she shepherded passage of other equal pay bills through the House, such as the Paycheck Fairness Act, although these bills

never advanced in the Senate.³⁴ Clearly, Pelosi has pursued both a partisan agenda and a distinctive set of priorities focused on the needs of women, children, and families. These priorities reflect both the policy preferences of current Democratic electoral coalitions and Pelosi's own life experiences as a woman and a mother.

In sum, it is clear that women are bringing a distinctive perspective and set of issue priorities to Congress. In comparison with men, Democratic women and moderate Republican women have focused more attention on the needs and interests of women, children, and families. Yet the advancement of women into Congress coincided with electoral trends that have created a more partisan and polarized Congress. In this contentious atmosphere, issues related to women's rights are now strongly associated with the Democratic Party, in effect reducing opportunities for bipartisan cooperation among women. Democratic women aggressively pursue policies ranging from expanded family leave to women's health initiatives while utilizing these proposals to attract particular groups of women voters, such as single and college-educated women. Since women's issues are now a part of the partisan divide, Democratic women serve their party's electoral goals by attacking the Republican agenda as harmful to women's interests. In turn, Republican women are compelled to defend their party's record rather than reach across the aisle to find compromise. While women as a group may be more inclined to compromise and consensus-building, current electoral trends and partisan dynamics in Congress reward women candidates and legislators who are aggressive partisans. Thus, the election of more women to Congress will bring more diverse viewpoints to the legislative process, but is not likely to change overall levels of polarization and gridlock.

ENDNOTES

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