

# Transforming the Political Agenda?

## Gender Differences in Bill Sponsorship on Women's Issues

By Michele Swers, Ph.D., and Amy Caiazza, Ph.D.

Summary of an article by Michele Swers, Ph.D., Mary Washington College, presented at *Women Transforming Congress: Gender Analyses of Institutional Life*, a conference sponsored by The Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center at The University of Oklahoma, April 2000.

*“But I have to tell you, when I got to Washington, I found that some of the ‘women’s issues—the family issues’—weren’t being addressed by the men in power. Things like child support enforcement and women’s health issues and family safety issues. It wasn’t that the men were opposed to these issues—they just didn’t get it. They were not sufficiently aware of them. So I realized, in many important areas—if we women in government don’t take action, no one else will” (Congresswoman Marge Roukema (R-NJ), Congressional Record, April 13, 1999).*

Congresswoman Roukema’s comments imply that electing more women to Congress will not just help achieve equality but will influence both the range of issues considered on the national agenda and the formulation of policy solutions. She is not alone in her belief that electing more women will have a substantive policy impact. Media commentators, political activists, and feminist scholars all suggest that female legislators will be more attentive to the needs of women, children, and families.

Will women’s increased representation change the issues discussed in Congress? In a paper presented at *Women Transforming Congress: Gender Analyses of Institutional Life*, a conference sponsored by The Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center at The University of Oklahoma in April 2000, Michele Swers of Mary Washington College analyzes bill sponsorship patterns during the 103rd (1993-94) and 104th (1995-96) Congresses in order to examine gender differences in attention to legislation concerning women’s issues. She demonstrates that congresswomen are more likely than congressmen to pursue women’s issue legislation. However, men’s and women’s willingness to support and advocate for women’s issue

bills is constrained by characteristics of the political and institutional contexts, including the ideological approach of the majority party in Congress, the external political climate, and the member’s place within the institutional power structure.

### Data and Methodology

Bill sponsorship is a good indicator of which members of Congress are trying to bring women’s issues to the national agenda because, while members sponsor bills for a variety of reasons, they have complete control over the number and the content of the bills they sponsor. This study measures the number of women’s issue bills sponsored by each member of the House of Representatives. Women’s issue bills are defined as bills that are particularly salient to women because they seek to achieve equality for women; they address women’s special needs, such as women’s health concerns or child care issues; or they confront issues with which women have traditionally been concerned in their role as caregivers, such as education or the protection of children.<sup>1</sup> In her analysis, Swers further divides women’s issue legislation into three subsets: “feminist,” social welfare, and “anti-feminist” bills.<sup>2</sup>

Table 1 lists the number of members sponsoring each subset of bills and the total number of bills in each category in the 103rd and 104th Congresses.

### Differences between the 103rd and 104th Congresses

In addition to their overwhelming concern with voter reaction, members of Congress must constantly consider how their party leadership and fellow caucus members will interpret their legislative actions. Therefore, a representative's ability to express gender-related preferences is highly dependent on variations in the political and institutional contexts, particularly the identity of the majority party, the relative power of the leadership, and the ideological composition of Congress. Because of differences in these factors between 103rd and 104th Congresses, comparing legislative behavior in these sessions provides an ideal opportunity to assess how the political and institutional environment impacts the decisions of members about what kind of policies to advance.

Of the two Congresses, the 103rd Congress arguably provided the more favorable environment for women's issue legislation. The 1992 Congressional elections were hailed as "The Year of the Woman" and led to a rise in the number of female representatives, from 28 in the 102nd Congress to 47 in the 103rd. The election of Bill Clinton brought a President who held liberal views on women's issues

and benefited from a gender gap. Since women's issues were highlighted in both the Congressional and presidential campaigns, the agenda was particularly open to women's issue proposals.

In contrast, after the 1994 elections agenda control shifted to Republicans, particularly the new conservative freshmen, who believed they had an electoral mandate to dismantle the welfare state built up by Democrats during the New Deal and the Great Society.<sup>3</sup> Core Republican constituencies vigorously opposed liberal positions on women's issues, particularly reproductive rights. Feminist groups lost access to party and committee leaders as groups representing Christian conservatives gained the ear of the new Republican leaders.

These changes in the policy agenda gained strength from Republican efforts to concentrating power in the party leadership and reduce the independent influence of committees. Perhaps the most important institutional change was Gingrich's decision to reward ideological loyalty over seniority in the committee assignment process by elevating conservative loyalists to committee chairs over more senior members. Gingrich also created party task forces to handle important policy matters like Medicare and the elimination of executive departments. These task forces excluded Democrats from deliberation and further limited the independence of committee leaders.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1. Women's Issue Bill Sponsorship in the 103rd and 104th Congresses**

Issue Type	103rd Congress (N=433)		104th Congress (N=430)	
	<i>Members Sponsoring Bills</i>	<i>Number of Bills</i>	<i>Members Sponsoring Bills</i>	<i>Number of Bills</i>
<b>All Women's Issue Bills</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>510</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>569</b>
Feminist	99	221	82	175
Social Welfare	138	264	176	351
Anti-Feminist	11	14	29	44

Note: In the 103rd Congress, a group of 11 bills concerning the nanny tax were included in the full set of women's issues but were not assigned to any of the policy categories. In the 104th Congress, separate sections of an omnibus bill sponsored by Barbara Vucanovich (R-NV) were counted in the feminist and anti-feminist category.

**Table 2. 103rd and 104th Congresses:  
Women’s Issue Bill\* Sponsorship by Party and Gender**

Congress	Democratic Men (103rd N=220) (104th N=165)		Democratic Women (103rd N=36) (104th N=31)		Republican Men (103rd N=163) (104th N=217)		Republican Women (103rd N=12) (104th N=17)	
	<i>Percent Sponsoring Bills</i>	<i>Number of Bills</i>	<i>Percent Sponsoring Bills</i>	<i>Number of Bills</i>	<i>Percent Sponsoring Bills</i>	<i>Number of Bills</i>	<i>Percent Sponsoring Bills</i>	<i>Number of Bills</i>
<b>103rd</b>	45%	220	72%	134	37%	111	83%	45
<b>104th</b>	54%	173	77%	111	47%	229	59%	56

\*All women’s issue bills

Since most women in the House were Democrats, they had little opportunity to influence the legislative agenda on women’s issues after the 104th Congress. The Republican leadership further reduced the impact of women as a group by defunding legislative service organizations including the Congressional Caucus for Women’s Issues. Thus, Republicans eliminated the extra staff resources that Democratic and moderate Republican women utilized to develop independent omnibus proposals concerning women’s health, violence against women, and other issues. Finally, those women with the potential to influence policymaking included more senior moderate Republican women and a new group of socially conservative Republican freshman women.

**How Women Influence the Congressional Policy Agenda**

Table 2 compares women’s issue bill sponsorship by gender and party for the 103rd and 104th Congresses. The results clearly demonstrate the importance of institutional position, particularly majority party status, to a member’s level of activity on women’s issues. Democratic and Republican men and women all sponsor more women’s issue bills when their party holds power, with Democrats reducing the number of women’s issue bills they sponsored from the 103rd to the 104th Congress, while Republicans increased their sponsorship activity from the 103rd to the 104th Congress. Thus, majority party status translates into agenda control, and all members increase their sponsorship

rates when they believe they have an opportunity to shape policy outcomes.

Within each party, women are more likely to sponsor women’s issue bills than are their male colleagues. Across both Congresses, between 23 percent and 27 percent points more Democratic women than Democratic men utilized their scarce resources of time, staff, and political capital to develop women’s issue legislation. Among Republicans, 83 percent of Republican women sponsored a women’s issue bill in the 103rd Congress, compared to just 37 percent of Republican men. However, in the 104th Congress, the proportion of Republican women sponsoring women’s issue bills dropped to 59 percent, only 12 percentage points more than Republican men. This 24 percentage point drop was largely due to the election of six conservative Republican freshman women, none of whom sponsored any type of women’s issue bill. In contrast, only one of the ten Republican women who served in both the 103rd and 104th Congresses reduced her sponsorship of women’s issue bills to zero. The other nine women either sponsored the same number of women’s issue bills or increased their sponsorship, with six of these ten women doubling the number of women’s issue bills they sponsored (data not shown).

The influence of gender on a member’s legislative behavior is highly dependent on his/her specific political ideology. All Democratic women and moderate Republican women are much more likely

to sponsor women’s issue bills than are their male colleagues of the same party and ideology. In contrast, conservative Republican women are not more likely to sponsor women’s issue bills than are their conservative Republican male counterparts. When Republican members are divided by ideology into moderates and conservatives, one finds that all of the moderate Republican women serving in the 104th Congress sponsored a women’s issue bill. However, only one of the eight conservative Republican women, Barbara Vucanovich, sponsored a women’s issue bill (data not shown).

At this point it is difficult to determine whether conservative women will continue to neglect women’s issues or actively advocate women’s issue proposals from an anti-feminist point of view. Among the eight conservative women serving in the 104th Congress, six were freshmen. First-term legislators need to spend time solidifying their hold on their district and developing their re-election constituencies. Therefore, many freshmen focus their energy on specific district concerns<sup>5</sup>. However, the freshman status of these conservative Republican women cannot completely explain their inattention to women’s issues. A comparison of the sponsorship activity of freshman and senior conservative, male Republicans demonstrates that a similar proportion of these male legislators sponsored women’s issue bills. Alternatively, the lack of attention to women’s issues by conservative Republican women could be a conscious political choice. Given their small numbers in Congress, conservative women knew that their gender and

their position on women’s issues would gain media attention. These women made a point of stating that they did not “claim sisterhood with the so-called ‘women’s agenda’” and that they viewed themselves as “citizens” rather than as women.<sup>6</sup>

### Gender Differences in Feminist, Social Welfare, and Anti-Feminist Bill Sponsorship

Tables 3 and 4 indicate that there are important gender differences in the sponsorship of feminist, social welfare, and anti-feminist legislation. Across both the 103rd and 104th Congresses, Democratic and Republican men were more likely to sponsor social welfare bills than feminist bills. Conversely, in both the 103rd and 104th Congresses, larger proportions of Democratic women sponsored feminist bills than social welfare bills. In fact, in the 104th Congress, Democratic women sponsored almost the same number of feminist bills as did their more numerous male colleagues. Similarly, the small group of twelve Republican women serving in the 103rd Congress sponsored more feminist bills than their 163 Republican male counterparts. However, during the 104th Congress, Republican women proposed more social welfare bills than feminist bills.

Male legislators’ propensity to sponsor social welfare legislation demonstrates their responsiveness to constituency concerns on such issues as health care and education. Congressmen’s comparative neglect of feminist issues reflects the fact that these issues do not yet have an established place on the Congressional agenda and that they are often

**Table 3. 103rd Congress: Feminist, Social Welfare, and Anti-Feminist Bill Sponsorship by Party and Gender**

Issue Type	Democratic Men (N=220)		Democratic Women (N=36)		Republican Men (N=163)		Republican Women (N=12)	
	Percent Sponsoring Bills	Number of Bills	Percent Sponsoring Bills	Number of Bills	Percent Sponsoring Bills	Number of Bills	Percent Sponsoring Bills	Number of Bills
<b>Feminist</b>	23%	88	58%	72	12%	29	75%	32
<b>Social Welfare</b>	33%	128	47%	59	26%	64	42%	13
<b>Anti-Fem.</b>	<1%	1	0%	0	6%	13	0%	0

**Table 4. 104th Congress: Feminist, Social Welfare, and Anti-Feminist Bill Sponsorship by Party and Gender**

Issue Type	Democratic Men (N=165)		Democratic Women (N=31)		Republican Men (N=217)		Republican Women (N=17)	
	Percent Sponsoring Bills	Number of Bills	Percent Sponsoring Bills	Number of Bills	Percent Sponsoring Bills	Number of Bills	Percent Sponsoring Bills	Number of Bills
<b>Feminist</b>	19%	39	65%	70	11%	43	35%	23
<b>Social Welfare</b>	44%	133	52%	41	36%	146	59%	31
<b>Anti-Fem.</b>	1%	1	0%	0	12%	40	12%	3

controversial. Feminist issues have the potential to expose cleavages within political parties and mobilize committed grassroots activity in the future election. Thus, it is possible that gender provided the added intensity of interest to encourage Democratic and Republican congresswomen to take risks in order to place feminist issues on the national agenda.

Why did Republican women serving in the 104th Congress shift their focus to social welfare legislation? It is possible that these Republican women recognized that as members of the majority party, they had more opportunities to see their preferences on social welfare issues passed into law. Alternatively, they may have calculated that feminist issues would create conflict with conservative Republican Party caucus members and key Republican interest group supporters. Members who expose conflicts within the party and antagonize important supporters invite sanctions from party leaders, which would prevent them from seeing their priorities passed in other policy areas.

Finally, Tables 3 and 4 demonstrate that Republican men sponsored the overwhelming majority of anti-feminist bills. When agenda control shifted to the Republicans in the 104th Congress, the number of anti-feminist bills offered by these legislators tripled, rising from 13 to 40 bills. The rise in anti-feminist proposals reflects both the increasingly conservative Republican membership, with 19 percent of the 36 conservative male Republican freshman sponsoring anti-feminist bills, and the status of social

conservatives as a key Republican constituency. Among Republican women, none of the new conservative freshmen sponsored an anti-feminist bill. However, these women were active co-sponsors of such legislation, with all but one co-sponsoring more than the Republican average of five anti-feminist bills, and four of the six women co-sponsoring more than the conservative Republican average of 6.5 anti-feminist bills.

### **Are Congresswomen Transforming Congress?**

The analysis presented above suggests that women are both transforming and adjusting to the institution of Congress. Congresswomen are clearly bringing women's issues to the national agenda. They are also adjusting to institutional norms, as their efforts to pursue gender-based preferences are guided by the limitations of party structures and constituent demands. Within these constraints, however, a close inspection of gender differences in bill sponsorship patterns indicates that including more Democratic and Republican women at the policymaking table will have a substantive impact on the quality of debate and the nature of policy outcomes.

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*This Research-in-Brief was written by Dr. Amy B. Caiazza, a Study Director at the Institute for Women's Policy Research, and Dr. Michele Swers of Mary Washington College. April Shaw, a Research Assistant at the Institute for Women's Policy Research, also contributed. The Brief is based on a paper by Dr. Swers.*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> To identify women's issues, the study uses the monthly legislative reports of five major liberal and conservative women's groups that claim to represent women's interests and have legislative departments devoted to following women's issues in Congress. The liberal groups include the American Association of University Women and the National Organization for Women. Concerned Women for America and Eagle Forum are conservative groups. The Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues (CCWI) is a bipartisan but liberal-leaning Congressional caucus devoted to the promotion of women's, children's, and family issues. In the 104th Congress, the Republican Caucus defunded CCWI, and its staff formed Women's Policy, Inc., a think tank devoted to providing nonpartisan research and information on legislative actions affecting women and families. In the analysis of the 104th Congress, Women's Policy, Inc. replaces CCWI.

To ensure that there is no systematic bias in the sample, approximately 5,000 bill synopses per Congress describing the bills proposed by each Republican and Democratic member were reviewed. Bills matching the subject areas identified by the women's groups were added to the sample. The final sample contains 510 bills for the 103rd Congress and 569 bills for the 104th Congress.

<sup>2</sup> "Feminist" bills seek to achieve role equity or role change for women. During the 103rd and 104th Congresses, examples of feminist bills included proposals to protect reproductive rights, expand family and medical leave, increase funding for women's health research, protect victims of domestic violence or sexual harassment, create programs for women-owned businesses, establish gender equity programs in education, enforce child support laws, and increase access to child care for welfare recipients. Conversely, "anti-feminist" legislation seeks to inhibit role change as a threat to the traditional family. The majority of the anti-feminist bills introduced in the 103rd and 104th

Congresses concerned efforts to hinder access to abortion. Other initiatives sought to prohibit funding for international family planning programs, eliminate sex education programs in schools, outlaw gay marriage, prohibit homosexuals from serving in the military, eliminate affirmative action programs for women and minorities, and require welfare recipients to disclose the paternity of the child in order to receive benefits. Social welfare legislation encompasses both liberal and conservative proposals concerning such issues as health care, poverty assistance, and education. These issues highlight women's traditional role as caregiver. Examples of social welfare bills sponsored during the 103rd and 104th Congresses include proposals to expand health insurance coverage, reform Medicare, expand coverage of mental health services, increase funding for school lunches, create school choice voucher programs, establish regulations for foster care or adoption, punish crimes against children and the elderly, and reform welfare.

<sup>3</sup> James Gimpel, *Fulfilling the Contract: The First Hundred Days* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon Co., 1996); Linda Killian, *The Freshmen: What Happened to the Republican Revolution?* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> John Aldrich and David Rhode, "The Transition to Republican Rule in the House: Implications for Theories of Congressional Politics," Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 1995; John Aldrich and David Rhode, "Balance of Power: Republican Party Leadership and the Committee System in the 104th House," Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, 1997; C. Lawrence Evans and Walther Oleszek, *Congress Under Fire: Reform Politics and the Republican Majority* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Fenno, *Home Style: House Members in their Districts* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, Inc., 1978).

<sup>6</sup> Karen Czarnecki Miller, "Will These Women Clean House," *Policy Review* 72 (1995): 77-80.

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The Institute works with policymakers, scholars, and public interest groups around the country to design, execute, and disseminate research that illuminates economic and social policy issues affecting women and families, and to build a network of individuals and organizations that conduct and use women-oriented policy research. IWPR, an independent, nonprofit organization, also works in affiliation with the graduate programs in public policy and women's studies at The George Washington University.

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