

# On some measures, women in Congress outperform men

January 25 2011, By Sarah Galer

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Congresswomen consistently outperform their male counterparts on several measures of job performance, according to a recent study by University of Chicago scholar Christopher Berry.

The research comes as the 112th [Congress](#) is sworn in this month with 89 [women](#), the first decline in female representation since 1978. The study authors argue that because women face difficult odds in reaching Congress – women account for fewer than one in six representatives – the ones who succeed are more capable on average than their male colleagues.

Women in Congress deliver more federal projects to their home districts than men do, even when controlling for such factors as party affiliation and ideology, according to the research by Berry, Assistant Professor in the Harris School of Public Policy Studies, and his former student Sarah Anzia, MPP '07, now a doctoral student at Stanford University. Congresswomen also sponsor and co-sponsor more legislation than their male counterparts, the authors found. The study has recently been accepted for publication at the *American Journal of Political Science*.

The authors interpret their findings as a by-product of voter discrimination against female candidates. When women confront such bias, only the most talented, politically ambitious females will attempt to run for office, and voters will tend to elect the most highly capable women. Because of one or both of these factors, the women elected will on average be higher performing than their male colleagues.

“Women run for and are elected to public office at lower rates than men. This might be because women perceive themselves as less qualified to run than they actually are, or it might be because bias against women in the electorate produces a barrier to entry for them,” Berry said. “In either case, the central implication of sex–based political selection is that the women we observe in office will, on average, outperform the men.”

Since there is no direct way to measure legislator capability, the researchers measured performance in two ways. First, using Federal Assistance Award Data, a comprehensive compilation of federal domestic spending programs, the authors examined data from 1984 to 2004 showing the amount of federal program dollars that members of Congress brought to their home districts. The analysis encompassed discretionary spending, including most earmarks, but not entitlement programs or defense spending and other procurement programs.

Berry and Anzia found that congresswomen on average obtain 9 percent more in federal discretionary programs for their home districts—about \$49 million per year—than congressmen, even when taking into account variables such as party affiliation, majority party status, seniority, electoral vulnerability, ideology, committee assignments, and district traits.

The authors also compared changes over time in spending within districts, to gauge how much a given district received when represented by a woman rather than a man. This method ensured that the estimated advantage for females was not simply a result of the types of districts they represent.

Second, the researchers examined the policymaking activities of women and men in Congress. They found that women sponsor and co–sponsor significantly more bills than men, and that bills sponsored by women get more co–sponsorship support from their colleagues. More generally,

congresswomen score higher on various statistical measures of “network centrality,” meaning that they have stronger networks of collaboration than their male counterparts.

“Two fundamental [jobs](#) of congressional representatives are constituency service, which includes bringing home federal projects as well as other direct work with constituents, and legislating, which means writing bills and shepherding them through the lawmaking process,” said Berry. “The evidence shows that the women in Congress outperform the men on both levels.”

In what they dub “the Jackie (and Jill) Robinson Effect,” Berry and Anzia relate this “sex–based selection” to the experience of Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play Major League Baseball. It is not surprising that Robinson is widely considered to be one of the best players in the sport’s history, argue the authors, because he had to be the best in order to overcome the racial discrimination of the time.

Similarly, women running for Congress must be more motivated and more highly qualified than their male counterparts to win a seat. In fact, the worse the voter discrimination against women, the better women from those districts fare in Congress: the researchers found that congresswomen elected in more conservative districts, where they may face greater sex–based selection, achieve even larger advantages in spending than the average congresswomen.

“We emphasize that we are not arguing that women have more innate political talent than men, nor do we claim that all female candidates outperform their male counterparts,” Berry said. He pointed out that widows who enter Congress to fill their deceased husbands’ seats do not outperform congressmen, possibly because they bypassed the sex–based selection of elections.

“Our theory simply identifies a connection between the economics of discrimination and models of political agency: when sex discrimination is present among voters, women must be better than their male counterparts to be elected,” Berry said.

Provided by University of Chicago

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