

Study: Blame men for political gridlock; women may be better at compromise

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During the political gridlock that led to the 2013 federal government shutdown, the leading voices for compromise were the handful of female U.S. senators—only 20 percent of the overall legislative body.

"I don't think it's a coincidence that women were so heavily involved in trying to end this stalemate," Maine Sen. Susan Collins said in the New York Times. "Although we span the ideological spectrum, we are used to working together in a collaborative way."

Was Collins correct? Would Congress be less dysfunctional if it consisted of 80 percent women instead of men?

It's likely, according to a new study co-authored by a University of Kansas researcher.

"One implication is that female legislators might talk about politics and deliberately engage the other party more than their male colleagues," said Patrick Miller, a KU assistant professor of [political science](#). "That might have some effects on the kind of legislative environment we have. Maybe if we have more women in office, you'd have more communication, less fighting, and perhaps more legislating and less gridlock."

The researchers found that men in survey and experimental data were more likely than women to avoid cross-party political discussion, to judge political arguments based solely on what party is advancing them,

and to form strong political opinions about the opposite party's positions without actually listening to the other side's reasoning.

"Male Democrats and Republicans more than female partisans expect interacting with the other party to be an unpleasant, conflictual, anxious, anger-filled experience," Miller said. "So as a result, they talk about politics with people in the other party less so than women."

The results of the study are based on survey data from the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study conducted nationwide and 2014 experimental results involving KU undergraduate students. Miller said the research is the first to apply the psychological idea of intergroup anxiety into political science.

Miller and co-author Pamela Johnston Conover, a political science professor at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, published their findings recently in "Why Partisan Warriors Don't Listen: The Gendered Dynamics of Intergroup Anxiety and Partisan Conflict" in the Journal *"Politics, Groups, and Identities."*

"Male partisans are more likely to reject information, to reject opinions that come from the other party without engaging that information," Miller said. "Just because they hear that an argument comes from the other party they think about that information less. Yet they are more likely to reject that information strongly. In essence, male partisans are forming strong opinions that create polarization and conflict on less information than women."

Miller said these findings fit with psychological research known as the "male warrior argument" that focuses on men being hard-wired to fight.

"It's not that [women](#) don't have any of those feelings. It's just that they have fewer of them," he said. "We found these interesting patterns such

as being exposed to competitive elections makes you more hesitant to discuss politics and engage with the other side. So our elections divide us from each other as citizens rather than encourage us to discuss important political issues."

This idea is important, the study's authors said, because the act of listening to political opponents is a central tenet in the proper functioning of a deliberative democracy.

However, because their data dealt with responses from voters instead of elected officials, Miller said it presents another implication other than the function or potential dysfunction of a legislative body.

"Citizens also carry some burden for the problems that we have in politics today," he said. "We very readily condemn all the problems we find in Washington. Yet, we as citizens don't think very often about the role that we have in that."

By and large, voters nominate and elect more partisan politicians, he said.

"If we're condemning politicians for the way they act in office, they might just be giving us what we as citizens are looking for," Miller said, "that partisan warrior and gridlock."

Provided by University of Kansas

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