

A leader's gender plays a role in local government sustainability policymaking

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When it comes to local government, does the gender of a mayor or county executive matter in sustainability policymaking? Yes, but only in certain ways, according to new research from Binghamton University,

State University of New York.

Kristina Lambright, associate professor of public administration, and George Homsy, associate professor of public administration and director of the environmental studies program, explored the correlation between female leadership and local [government](#) adoption of sustainability policies in "Beyond community characteristics: a leader's gender and local government adoption of energy conservation practices and redistributive programmes," published recently in *Local Environment: The International Journal and Justice Sustainability*.

In Lambright and Homsy's study sample, local governments with a female leader adopted 29.2% more community energy policies than communities with male leaders. This group of policies focuses on helping citizens, non-profits and businesses reduce [energy consumption](#) by, for example, providing or funding energy audits and weatherization programs.

The researchers also found a 12.7% increase in the number of redistributive programs in communities headed by women. These programs support vulnerable populations by bolstering the social safety net. This type of program includes incentivizing affordable housing and funding childcare.

With a third set of policies, Lambright and Homsy found no correlation between a leader's gender and the adoption of government energy conservation practices. This group of policies includes such measures as updating streetlights with energy efficient bulbs and purchasing hybrid vehicles for the municipal fleet.

"There's a pretty well-documented literature of past research that indicates women and men do look at issues differently," Lambright said. "I am intrigued that there is this difference in the general population,

with women being generally more pro-environment, but that doesn't translate when they're in positions of power into greater support for government energy conservation efforts. I'm really interested in why that is, why this area."

The pair used data from the 2015 Local Government Sustainability Practices Survey conducted by the International City/County Management Association, which was completed by 1,672 local governments across the country. There are fewer women heading local governments than men, although the numbers have improved significantly through the decades, from 1% in 1974 to 17% in 2018. In addition to gender, the researchers took into account the impact of other variables, such as political party.

Democratic leaders were 18.5% more likely to adopt social welfare programs, but these municipalities were no more likely to have energy conservation measures of either type. Looking at national trends, you would expect that Democrats would be more supportive of all three sustainability practices than Republicans. National trends, however, don't necessarily influence the day-to-day operations of local governments, which provide such services as road maintenance and trash pickup.

"In most [local governments](#), it doesn't matter whether they are Republican or Democrat, they still have to provide lighting and plow the streets," Lambright explained.

Collective thinking and conservation

There are theories that explain the gender differences in politics. Women, for example, are more likely to find themselves in a vulnerable income position, and thus would benefit from social safety programs. Socialization may also play a role: women are often expected to assume caregiving roles and to consider the welfare of others—in other words,

thinking of the collective good rather than the individual.

This female socialization could lend itself to female policymakers' support of measures that require collective thinking, such as the adoption of social welfare programs and community energy saving measures.

Local governments must make significant investments to implement these initiatives. However, municipalities do not directly financially benefit from these efforts; instead, community residents and businesses do, Homsy explained.

By contrast, efforts to conserve a government's energy use will save a municipality itself money in the long run, perhaps making it an easy choice for elected officials regardless of whether they prioritize collective interests or not.

"A good question to examine and one possible explanation is, 'Are women leaders more collectively minded?'" Homsy said.

Next steps

Lambright and Homsy also found that municipalities are more likely to adopt sustainability measures if they are in a good financial position. The larger they are, the more resources they have to draw on in terms of government facilities, people and more. Smaller, cash-strapped communities might not feel able to pursue these avenues.

Size also matters in another way: jurisdictions with more than 100,000 people are a little more likely to have female leadership. Fourteen percent of female leaders serve in communities of this size, compared to 9% of male leaders, according to their research data.

Are places with an established interest in sustainability more likely to

elect female leaders in the first place? Does the size of the community contribute significantly to both sustainability and female leadership? Were sustainability policies adopted under a woman's leadership or years before?

Lambright and Homsy don't know—yet. Their current data show correlation, but not causation, leading them to their next project.

"In this next phase of our research, we are going to talk to male and female leaders in places where they have done something positive about the environment and find out how the project came about, what barriers they faced and how they dealt with those challenges," Homsy said.

They plan on interviewing around 60 local government officials, divided equally between women and men, who are involved with local environmental sustainability initiatives in New York state. Right now, they're working to identify these officials through news articles in New York state's largest daily newspapers. Ideally, the interview subjects will represent government at different levels, ranging from village to county, and will be selected randomly.

The researchers will probe their experience with sustainability issues, but also explore their management and communication styles and the particular challenges they faced. In addition, they will look at the sustainability initiatives themselves.

"Will we see differences between how men and women lead?" Lambright asked. "We will focus on [sustainability](#) policymaking, but we're also looking to see if there are differences in how men and women leaders approach leadership more generally."

More information: George C. Homsy et al, Beyond community characteristics: a leader's gender and local government adoption of

energy conservation practices and redistributive programmes, *Local Environment* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/13549839.2021.1886068](https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2021.1886068)

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