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Why Female Politicians Are More Effective

According to a forthcoming study in the American Journal of Political Science, women are the most effective lawmakers in the land.



Yuri Gripas / UPI-Landov

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi talks to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during a Women's History Month Celebration on Capitol Hill.

Some dubbed it "The Year of the Woman." But despite "mama grizzly" talk and a crop of high-profile female candidates, last year's elections resulted in no net additions to the female ranks of the Senate and, for the first time since 1978, a net loss in the House. In fact, more than 90 years after the first woman was elected to Congress, female politicians still hold less than a fifth of all national seats, and do only slightly better at the state level. But that's more than just a blow for diversity and equality, according to a forthcoming study in the American Journal of Political Science—because women also rank as the most effective lawmakers in the land.

The research is the first to compare the performance of male and female politicians nationally, and it finds that female members of the House rout their male counterparts in both pulling pork and shaping policy. Between 1984 and 2004, women won their home districts an average of \$49 million more per year than their male counterparts (a finding that held regardless of party, geography, committee position, tenure in office, or margin of victory). The spending jump was found within districts, too, when women moved into seats previously occupied by men, and the cash was for projects across the spectrum, not just "women's issues."

A similar performance gap showed up in policy: Women sponsored more bills (an average of three more per Congress), cosponsored more bills (an average of 26 more per Congress), and attracted a greater number of cosponsors than their colleagues who use the other restroom. These new laws driven by women were not only enacted—they were popular. In a pair of

by Tony Dokoupil

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additional working papers, led by Ohio State political scientists Craig Volden and Alan Wiseman, researchers tracked every bill introduced between 1981 and 2009, and found that those sponsored by women survived deeper into the legislative process, garnered more press attention, and were more likely to be deemed "important" overall. All of which leads the authors of the AJPS paper, University of Chicago Public Policy Professor Christopher Berry and his student and Stanford doctoral candidate Sarah Anzia, to conclude that it's the women themselves—specifically, their skills at "logrolling, agenda-setting, coalition building, and other deal-making activities"—that are responsible for the gender-performance divide.

So are women just innately better politicians? Probably not. More likely, say Berry and Anzia, female politicians are better than men because, as in other fields, they simply have to be. More than 90 years after the first woman was elected to Congress, female politicians still hold less than a fifth of all national seats, and do only slightly better at the state level. In order to overcome lingering bias against women in leadership positions, those women must work that much harder to be seen as equals.

At first their findings might seem like a paradox. If women are, as a matter of fact, the country's most persuasive and productive politicians, why do more than one in five Americans still openly admit they wouldn't vote for a female president, or would do so only with reservations? But in fact, says Berry, the two trends fit together handily. "If it's harder for women to succeed in politics," he says, "then those that do succeed are likely to be the most talented and hard working."

It's called "The Jackie (and Jill) Robinson Effect," as the AJPS paper is titled, a reference to the first black player in Major League Baseball who, not coincidentally, was one of best ballplayers of all time. Black players continued to outperform their white peers for decades after integration because, with latent racism still very much a part of baseball's culture, you had to be better than average to measure up. Over time, of course, that performance gap between white and black players evaporated as race-based obstacles fell away. But in the short term, teams like the Dodgers, which won six pennants and a World Series with Robinson, benefited greatly.

Today perhaps states like Maine, where three out of four members of the congressional delegation are female, may experience a similar benefit. But presumably it won't be available forever. As fewer people buy into the notion that women can't lead, it will become easier for less-than-superhuman women to win office. "I would expect that 50 years from now, these results wouldn't hold," says Berry. "At least one hopes."

This story originally appeared on The Daily Beast.

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