

UC Berkeley

Working Papers

Title

The Committee Assignments of State Legislators: An Underexplored Link in Understanding Gender Differences

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2f05z8bn>

Author

Carroll, Susan J.

Publication Date

2006-06-01

**The Committee Assignments of State Legislators:
An Underexplored Link in Understanding Gender Differences
in Policy-Related Impact**

Susan J. Carroll

Rutgers University

Paper prepared for delivery at “Women in Politics: Seeking Office and Making Policy,”
University of California, Berkeley, June 9-10, 2006.

Scholars of legislative politics have long recognized the importance of committees to the work that is done within legislative institutions as well as the importance of committee assignments to the influence that legislators have on legislation (Fenno 1973; Smith and Deering 1997). Yet, with a few notable exceptions, mostly among those studying Congress (e.g., Norton 1995; 2002; Swers 2002), scholars of women and politics have devoted surprisingly little attention to committees in studying the influence of women legislators on public policy. In particular, the literature focusing on women state legislators has given relatively little consideration to the possible connections between women's committee assignments and their legislative priorities and policy-related behavior.

Research on women state legislators has repeatedly demonstrated that women and men have somewhat different legislative priorities, with women legislators more likely than their male counterparts to be involved with legislation in the areas of women's rights, the welfare of families and children, health care, and education (e.g., Dodson and Carroll 1991; Carroll 2001; Thomas 1994; Saint-Germain 1989). If these differences in priorities and policy-related behavior among legislators reflect differences in interests between women and men, one might also expect to find gender differences in preferences for committees on which legislators might serve.

The preferences of legislators (and any gender differences in those preferences that may exist) are certainly one factor that comes into play in determining the committees to which legislators are assigned. However, final decisions about committee assignments are made by legislative leaders, still predominantly men in most states, who can bring their own attitudes about gender differences to bear on their decisions. Hypothetically, women and men in the aggregate could end up serving on different committees for any of the following reasons: (1) because women and men prefer different committees, (2) because legislative leaders think

women are better (or less) suited to certain committees and assign (or fail to assign) them to these committees despite women's preferences to the contrary, or (3) because of a combination of (1) and (2). Thus, a pattern of women and men legislators serving on different committees could be produced by differences in women's and men's preferences, gender stereotyping by legislative leaders, or both.

This paper provides a thorough and systematic analysis of possible gender differences in state legislative committee assignments to ascertain whether gender differences in committee assignments exist, whether these differences are a reflection of women's preferences or gender stereotyping, and whether gender differences have diminished over time. It also examines the correspondence between committee assignments and legislative priorities to assess the extent to which committee assignments are, in fact, an underexplored link in understanding gender differences in policy-related impact.

Previous Research on Gender Differences in Committee Assignments

Previous research provides some evidence that women and men serving in legislative bodies have received somewhat different committee assignments although gender differences may be less pronounced than they once were. Nevertheless, existing research provides an inconclusive response as to whether observed differences were due to gender stereotyping by those making committee assignments or to actual differences in women's and men's preferences.

Some of the earliest research on committee assignments was conducted by Maurice Duverger. In his work on European legislatures, Duverger found that women were much more likely to be found on committees dealing with topics such as public health, youth, family

questions, education, welfare, social policy, and labor; they were much less likely to serve on committees dealing with issues like the budget, finance, and economic policy. Moreover, he concluded that women were less often found on the "important" political committees not because of a lack of interest on their part, but rather because of exclusion by men (Duverger 1955, 95-98).

Most of what we know about the committee assignments of women legislators in the United States is based on the experiences of women in Congress, especially the U.S. House. Former Congresswomen Shirley Chisholm and Bella Abzug both wrote about the discrimination in committee assignments that they experienced and observed in the House. Noting that her first choice was the Education and Labor Committee, her second choice was the Banking and Currency Committee, her third choice was the Post Office and Civil Service Committee, and her fourth choice was Government Operations, Shirley Chisholm explained in her autobiography her dismay at learning that she had been appointed to the Agricultural Committee. Chisholm initially thought that perhaps as a "black member from one of the country's most deprived city neighborhoods" (Chisholm 1970, 96) she had been assigned to the committee because it had jurisdiction over food stamp programs and migrant labor, but then she learned that her subcommittee assignments were rural development and forestry. When she protested, she was assigned instead to the Veterans' Affairs Committee. Chisholm viewed this assignment as some improvement, observing, "There are a lot more veterans in my district than there are trees" (Chisholm 1970, 101).

Upon arriving in Congress Bella Abzug let it be known that she wanted to be appointed to the Armed Services Committee. Instead, she was assigned to Government Operations (Abzug 1972, pp. 22-23). In her autobiography Abzug also reported that of the twelve women serving in

the House when she came to Congress, five were assigned to the Education and Labor Committee while no woman was assigned to Rules, Judiciary, or Armed Services (Abzug 1972, 26-27).

According to Irwin Gertzog, the situation for women in Congress vis-a-vis committee assignments has improved over time. Although he found a strong pattern of gender differentiation in committee assignments prior to the mid-1960s, this pattern has not been as apparent in recent Congresses. He has argued that women "elected to the House since the mid-1960s have been more successful than their predecessors in securing prestigious assignments, and that they have fared better as a group than the males whose House careers began when theirs did" (Gertzog 1995, 139). Although women continue to be appointed to committees dealing with issues traditionally seen as more compatible with women's interests (e.g., aging, health care, education, and environment), they have also secured assignments to committees that were once all-male domains (Gertzog 1995, 133-36).

Similarly, Sally Friedman in her analysis of the assignments of newcomers to the U.S. House to prestige committees found change and improvement over time. Although gender differences still exist, white women have fared better in recent decades, particularly in obtaining assignments to committees with mid-level prestige (Friedman 1996).

Unlike prior research on assignments to congressional committees, Scott A. Frisch and Sean Q. Kelly were able to compare actual assignments with the committee requests made by members of Congress. Although the committee assignments requested by women did not differ significantly from those requested by their male colleagues, first-term women members were less likely to be appointed to their preferred committees. Frisch and Kelly also found important

differences between the parties, with Republican women less likely than Democratic women to get transfers to their preferred committees following their first term (Frisch and Kelly 2003). Although Frisch and Kelly did not directly investigate the reason why women members were less likely to receive appointments to their preferred committees, they did point to discrimination as a possible explanation, suggesting that, in particular, “the Republican committee selection process had a built in gender bias, that is Republican women were unlikely to have a place at the table from which to advocate the interests of women” (Frisch and Kelly 2003, 18).

Finally, despite the very small numbers of women who have served in the U.S. Senate, Laura W. Arnold and Barbara M. King analyzed the assignments women senators received from 1949 to 2001. They found that the breadth of women’s committee assignments increased with their numbers, and in the 107th Congress women were represented on 13 of the 16 standing committees in the Senate (Arnold and King 2002, 311). Nevertheless, women were somewhat underrepresented across all Congresses on the Senate’s four most prestigious committees (Arnold and King 2002).

Of course, the existing research on gender differences in committee assignments in Congress, reviewed above, suffers from two major limitations. The first is that none of the studies, except for Arnold’s and King’s study of the Senate, examines any Congress more recent than the 103rd, which was elected in 1992. The second is that the number of cases is very small, not only for the Senate but also for the House. Even after record numbers of women were elected to the U.S. House in 1992, there still were only 47 women members. And the number of women House members in previous Congresses never exceeded 29 (CAWP 2006).

Fortunately, research on state legislators avoids this problem of a small number of cases.

Unfortunately, however, less research exists on gender differences in committee assignments among state legislators, and much of the research that exists dates back to the 1970s. Similar to the research on Congress, previous research on the committee assignments of state legislators provides incomplete and somewhat inconsistent answers to the questions of how much gender differentiation in committee assignments exists and why it exists.

Based on her interviews with fifty women legislators selected on the basis of competence and diversity to attend a national conference sponsored by the Center for the American Woman and Politics in 1972, Jeane J. Kirkpatrick concluded that there was no discrimination against women in initial committee assignments and in most subsequent assignments. Because she did not systematically compare the committee assignments of women with those of men, she could not draw any conclusions about whether women and men served on different kinds of committees. However, Kirkpatrick did see women's committee assignments as largely a reflection of their preferences. She suggested, "Women assigned to education, public health, child welfare, and other 'women's' subjects are usually there because they have requested the assignment" (Kirkpatrick 1974, 126).

Irene Diamond, in her study of women serving in four New England legislatures in 1971, was more reluctant than Kirkpatrick to rule out discrimination as a possible explanation for gender differentiation in committee assignments. Although women did not appear to be excluded from committees such as judiciary and ways and means, Diamond found that they were concentrated on education committees and on health and welfare committees. Although she admitted that she could not tell from her data whether or not discrimination took place, she described how women who were undecided about their committee preferences were often

"channeled" toward certain committees, and she discussed the difficulties women faced when their interests did not coincide with their colleagues' expectations about their interests (Diamond 1977, 45-46, 89-91).

More recently, Mark Considine and Iva Deutchman in their study of legislators serving in six northeastern states in 1988 found women disproportionately served on "women's and children's committees," which they defined as "committees whose primary charge is legislation where women and children are the beneficiaries such as battered women's shelters, rape reform, infant vaccination and the like" (Considine and Deutchman 1994, 861). They did not, however, examine assignments to other types of committees, and they were not able to determine whether women's over-representation on women's and children's committees was a reflection of their preferences or gender stereotyping by those responsible for the appointments.

Kathleen Dolan and Lynne E. Ford did examine assignments to a wider range of committees in their study of legislators serving in 15 states in 1972, 1982, and 1992. They found evidence of change over time with women legislators more likely in 1992 to be serving on committees such as finance, appropriations, commerce, and judiciary than in the two previous decades. However, while Dolan and Ford did not make a direct gender comparison, their data clearly show that even in 1992 smaller proportions of women than men served on these "prestige" committees. Meanwhile, larger proportions of women than men served on education and health and welfare committees (Dolan and Ford 1997, 142, 144, 146).

Similarly, in a study of African American state legislators serving in 1991, David Hedge, James Button, and Mary Spear found that men were much more likely to serve on the "money

committees, such as appropriations and revenue, while women were far more likely to serve on committees dealing with education, families, welfare, and health. Despite these differences, however, women were not less satisfied than men with their committee assignments (Hedge et al. 1996, 92).

Viewed as a whole, existing research on women's committee assignments is for the most part outdated, based on samples that are either unrepresentative of the national population of officeholders (e.g., studies of state legislators from a few states) or very small in size (e.g., studies of Congress), and inconclusive. Although most studies point to some gender differentiation in committee assignments, the evidence is less clear as to whether differences in committee assignments are the product of women's own preferences or gender stereotyping by party leaders responsible for appointments. The remainder of this paper attempts to provide more conclusive evidence regarding questions related to gender differentiation in committee assignments by systematically examining gender differences in committee assignments apparent among nationwide samples of women and men serving in state legislatures in both 1988 and 2001.

Description of the Data Sets

In the summer of 1988 under a grant from the Charles H. Revson Foundation, the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) conducted a nationwide survey of women and men serving as state legislators. Four samples of legislators were drawn: (1) the population of women state senators (N=228); (2) a systematic sample of one-half of women state representatives (N=474); (3) a systematic sample of male state senators, stratified by state and sampled in

proportion to the number of women from each state in our sample of women state senators (N=228); and (4) a systematic sample of male state representatives, stratified by state and sampled in proportion to the number of women from each state in our sample of women state senators (N=474).¹

A telephone interview of approximately one-half hour in duration was attempted with each of the legislators, resulting in the following response rates: 86% for female senators; 87% for female representatives; 60% for male senators; and 73% for male representatives. Respondents did not differ significantly from all the legislators selected for any of the four samples in their party affiliation, the one variable for which we have data for all legislators.

In the summer of 2001 under a grant from the Barbara Lee Foundation, CAWP conducted a similar nationwide survey of women and men serving as state legislators, following the same sampling procedure used in 1988 and replicating many of the questions from the 1988 survey to allow for over-time comparisons. Four samples of legislators were drawn: (1) the population of all women state senators (n=396); (2) a systematic sample of one-half of women state representatives (n=718); (3) a systematic sample of male state senators, stratified by state and sampled in proportion to the number of women from each state in our sample of women state senators (n=396); and (4) a systematic sample of male state representatives, stratified by state and sampled in proportion to the number of women from each state in our sample of women state senators (n=718).

Response rates for the 2001 survey were: 56% for female senators; 58% for female representatives; 40% for male senators; 49% for male representatives.² As in 1988, respondents and non-respondents in 2001 did not differ significantly in their party affiliation, the one variable

for which data were available for all sampled legislators.

Like the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives, state senates and state houses are very different political institutions. The lower houses of state legislatures vary considerably in size and influence across the states while state senates tend to be smaller and show less variation. Because of these differences, state senators and state representatives are analyzed separately throughout this paper.

An Overview of Gender Difference in State Legislative Committee Assignments

Although previous studies of state legislators have generally found some gender differentiation in committee assignments, most of this research was conducted prior to or near the beginning of the contemporary women's movement. That movement, which is now almost four decades old, has had a profound effect in changing public attitudes toward women, and women have made notable progress in moving into nontraditional fields and careers. Perhaps the impact of changing gender relations has been felt inside, as well as outside, legislative institutions. If so, one might expect to find that gender differentiation in committee assignments, like the widow's succession as a route into Congress for women, is largely a phenomenon of the past. Certainly, one would expect that gender differentiation in committee assignments would have decreased over time.

Table 1 about here

Table 1, presenting the proportions of women and men serving on several major types of committees in 2001 and 1988, indicates that these expectations are only partially met. For most types of committees in 2001, gender differences in committee assignments were not apparent.

However, a couple of very notable exceptions exist. Moreover, while gender differences in assignments were less apparent in 2001 than in 1988, for two types of committees they were remarkably persistent.

With only one exception, women in 2001 were not significantly less likely than men in either house of the legislature to be assigned to what have generally been designated as “prestige” committees (e.g., Duverger 1955; Gertzog 1995).³ These “prestige” committees include: appropriations and budget; finance and revenue; judiciary; rules; ways and means; and banking, business, and commerce. The only notable gender difference among “prestige” committees was for rules committees in state senates to which women were somewhat less likely than men to be assigned (Table 1). Women also were not significantly more or less likely than men to be appointed to four other types of committees (government affairs, environment, transportation, and agriculture) prevalent in state legislatures across the country (Table 1).⁴

Nevertheless, significant gender differences in committee assignments were apparent in 2001 for two types of committees—education and health and human services (Table 1). The differences were particularly large for health and human services committees, with women state senators and state representatives almost twice as likely as their male counterparts to serve on these committees (Table 1). In both state senates (where about one-third of the women served on health and human services committees and almost one-third served on education committees) and state houses (where a quarter of the women served on each of these types of committees), larger proportions of women were serving on health and human services committees and education committees than on any other type of committee. This was not true for men; male legislators were about equally likely or more likely to serve on several other types of committees

as they were to serve on education or health and human services committees.

When gender differences in committee assignments are examined over time, they appear less prevalent in the early part of the 21st century than they were in 1988. As Table 1 shows, women senators in 1988 were more likely than men to serve on government affairs committees and much less likely than men to serve on finance and revenue committees. Similarly, women representatives in 1988 were less likely than their male counterparts to serve on transportation committees. By 2001, these gender differences were greatly diminished or had disappeared. Even for health and human services committees and education committees where significant gender differences were clearly evident in both years, gender differences in assignments were somewhat less pronounced in 2001 than in 1988.

The Effects of Party, Tenure in Office, and Professionalism of the Legislature on Gender Differences in Committee Assignments

Perhaps factors other than gender help to explain the observed differences between women and men in their appointments to health and human services and to education committees. Perhaps Republicans, as the more ideologically conservative party, are more likely to mirror traditional gender roles in their committee assignments than are Democrats. Consistent with the pattern of diminished gender differences over time, perhaps gender differentiation is more apparent among veteran legislators than among newcomers to the legislature. Perhaps gender differentiation varies by level of professionalism; gender differences might be apparent in “citizen” legislatures but absent in more “professionalized” legislatures.

Table 2 about here

Table 2 presents data relevant to these hypotheses, focusing on education and health and human services committees where gender differences in committee assignments were statistically significant for both state senators and state representatives. Gender differences are just as apparent among Democrats as among Republicans. In both parties women were significantly more likely than men to be appointed to health and services committees, and although the differences are not statistically significant except for Democratic state representatives, women in both parties were slightly more likely than men to serve on education committees.

Consistent with the idea that gender differences in committee assignments may be lessening over time, “newcomer” women who had served in the state senate for four years or less were not significantly more likely than newcomer men in state senates to be appointed to health and human services or education committees (Table 2). Similarly, newcomer women who had served in state houses for two years or less were not significantly more likely than newcomer men to serve on health and human services committees although they were slightly more likely than newcomer men to be assigned to education committees.

With the exception of appointments to education committees in state houses, gender differences were much more apparent and statistically significant for veteran legislators who had served more than four years in the senate or two years in the house. Nevertheless, the cohort differences between newcomers and veterans do not occur simply because newcomer women were appointed to health and human services and education committees at lower rates than veteran women. Rather, the differences stem, at least in part, from the fact that veteran men (in three of four cases) less often than newcomer men served on these committees. Unfortunately, I cannot determine from these data whether men among veteran legislators were less likely than

women to be appointed to health and human services and education committees in the first place or whether, subsequent to their first term in office, they transferred off these committees at higher rates than women.

Contrary to the expectation that gender differences in committee assignments might be more apparent in “citizen” than in “professional” legislatures, gender differences were very small in states with low levels of professionalization and much larger and statistically significant in states with highly professionalized legislatures (Table 2). The more professionalized the legislature, the more likely women state representatives were to be serving on health and human services and education committees. Moreover, women state representatives in the legislatures that are most professionalized were more than twice as likely as their male colleagues to be serving on health and human services committees and almost twice as likely to be serving on education committees (Table 2). The lack of gender differentiation in legislatures with low levels of professionalism may be related to the fact that these legislatures have fewer committees on which to serve. Among state representatives in legislatures with low levels of professionalization, only 49.3 percent ($n = 221$) reported that they served on more than one standing committee while 91.1 percent ($n=135$) of state representatives in highly professionalized legislatures served on two or more standing committees. Nevertheless, the degree to which gender differences are apparent in the most professionalized legislatures suggests both that women are more likely to be appointed to health and human services and education committees when more committee choices are available and that greater professionalization does not seem to lead to less gender differentiation.

Differences in Preferences or Gender Stereotyping?

Responses to three questions were examined to assess whether gender differentiation in committee assignments is due primarily to differences in the preferences of women and men legislators or to gender stereotyping by legislative leaders who may assign women to committees that are counter to women's own preferences. First, legislators were asked if they were serving on any standing committee to which they initially did not want to be assigned. Second, legislators were asked if there was a standing committee on which they would like to serve but to which they had not been appointed. Finally, legislators were asked to specify which of their assigned committees dealt with legislation that interested them most.

Dissatisfaction with Committee Assignments

As Table 3 demonstrates, substantial proportions, about one-third, of legislators were serving on a standing committee to which they initially did not want to be assigned. However, women legislators were not significantly more likely than their male counterparts to be dissatisfied with their committee assignments. Although women representatives who were newcomers were a little more likely than their newcomer male colleagues to be serving on a committee that they disliked, women senators who were newcomers were slightly less likely than their male counterparts to express dissatisfaction (Table 3).

Table 3 about here

These findings of similarity between women and men in their level of dissatisfaction with committee assignments in 2001 represent quite a change from 1988 when sizable gender differences were apparent among all senators, newcomers and veterans alike, as well as among

newcomers in the state house. Contrary to the pattern for 2001, significant gender differences were evident among state senators in 1988, with 41.0 percent of women but only 26.3 percent of male senators ($\tau_{b} = .15, p < .01$) dissatisfied with at least one committee assignment. Women state representatives in 1988, like women state representatives in 2001, were not more likely than their male counterparts to be dissatisfied with their committee assignments. Nevertheless, there were gender differences among newcomers to state houses; 37.6 percent of women who had served in the state house for two years or less, compared with 17.5 percent of newcomer men ($\tau_{b} = .22, p < .01$), were serving on a standing committee to which they initially did not want to be assigned.

Table 4 about here

While overall gender differences in dissatisfaction with committee assignments seem to have dissipated between 1988 and 2001, nevertheless gender differences in dissatisfaction were apparent for legislators who served on some specific types of committees in 2001 (Table 4). Among state senators, women who served on several “prestige” committees were more likely than the men on those committees—and significantly more likely in the case of appropriations and budget, judiciary, and rules committees—to report that they initially had not wanted to be appointed to these committees. Clearly, a number of women senators who did not request appointments to the so-called “prestige” committees were assigned to them anyway. Because women in 2001 constituted only 20.1 percent of all state senators and far less than this national average in a number of states, it may well be that senate leaders in some states spread the women around to make sure that prestige committees had some female representation.

The pattern is more mixed for state representatives and reversed in some instances, with

slightly larger proportions of men than women dissatisfied initially with appointments to several prestige committees (appropriations and budget, judiciary, rules, ways and means). Women state representatives serving on banking, business, and commerce committees were, however, significantly more likely than men to express dissatisfaction with their appointment to these committees.

In addition to prestige committees, Table 4 presents data for the two committees, health and human services and education, on which women were significantly more likely than men to be serving (Table 1). As Table 4 shows, satisfaction levels on education committees were high; very few men or women on those committees initially had not wanted to be appointed to an education committee. Dissatisfaction was more evident among legislators on health and human services committees. Gender differences were more apparent here as well, with women less likely than men (and significantly so in state houses) to have been initially dissatisfied with their appointments to health and human services committees.

These findings for education and health and human services committees are evidence that legislative leaders have not engaged in widespread gender stereotyping; they do not appear to have assigned women disproportionately against their preferences to health and human services or education committees. Although large proportions of women serve on health and human services and education committees, the vast majority of women committee members seem content with their appointments to these committees.

Preferences for Other Committees

Findings regarding legislators' preferences to serve on committees other than those on

which they serve add further evidence that women legislators have stronger preferences than men for health and human services and education committees. As Table 3 demonstrates, about half of all legislators and even higher proportions of newcomers in both chambers expressed a desire to be appointed to a standing committee other than the committees on which they served.

Nevertheless, women legislators were not significantly more likely than men to want an appointment to a standing committee different from those committees to which they had been appointed. This was true for newcomers among legislators as well as for legislators overall.

Table 5 about here

Despite the similarity between women and men in their levels of desire to serve on a committee to which they had not been appointed, clear gender differences were apparent among those legislators who desired an appointment to a committee on which they did not serve.

Among state senators, men were significantly more likely than women to desire appointment to committees focusing on banking, business, and commerce. In contrast, women senators were significantly more likely than male senators to want to be appointed to health and human services committees. While the difference was not statistically significant, women senators also showed a stronger preference than men for appointment to education committees, with one of every five women wanting to serve on an education committee. The three most desired committees among women senators were: education; finance and revenue; and health and human services (with appropriations a close fourth). In contrast, for male senators the three most desired committees were: finance and revenue; appropriations and budget; and banking, business, and commerce. Thus, while men most often desired the “money” committees, women’s strongest preferences were a mix of “money” committees and the “human interest” committees of education and health

and human services.

This pattern of women showing more interest in serving on education and health and human services committees, apparent among senators, also is evident among state representatives (Table 5). Men among state representatives who desired assignment to a different committee were more likely than women to want an appointment to an appropriations and budget committee or to a banking, business, and commerce committee although these gender differences were not statistically significant. In contrast, women representatives were somewhat more likely to desire appointments to judiciary committees, and like women in the senate, they were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to want to be appointed to education committees and health and human services committees (Table 5). The three most desired committees among male representatives were: appropriations and budget; education; and banking, business, and commerce. Women state representatives shared with men a high level of interest in appointments to education committees and appropriations and budget committees. But in contrast to men who preferred banking, business, and commerce committees, the other committee most highly desired among women representatives was health and human services. Health and human services was one of the least desired committee types among male state representatives (Table 5).

Interest in the Work of the Committee

Legislators who served on more than one committee were asked to specify which of the committees on which they served dealt with legislation that interested them the most. For the most part, responses to this question provide further evidence of women's preference for health and human services and education committees.

For legislators serving on education committees, women senators were more likely than their male counterparts (65.0 percent compared to 51.6 percent) to say that the education committee was the committee whose legislation interested them most; surprisingly, however, these figures were virtually reversed among state representatives where women serving on education committees were less likely than men (51.3 percent compared to 65.3 percent) to point to their work on an education committee as most interesting.

For legislators serving on health and human services committees, the pattern was more consistent across the two chambers. Among both state senators (45.1 percent compared to 24.0 percent) and state representatives (55.7 percent compared to 47.2 percent), women more often than men reported that health and human services was the committee whose legislation interested them most.

Relationship Between Committee Membership and Top Legislative Priority

As one might expect, there is a relationship between membership on various committees and the legislation to which senators and representatives devote their most serious attention. We asked each legislator to describe the one bill that had been her or his personal top priority during the current session. We then coded legislators' descriptions of their top priority bills into 18 broad, content-based categories.

Table 6 about here

Table 6 presents the proportions of legislators serving on education committees, legislators serving on health and human services committees, and legislators in general whose top priority bills fell into four relevant categories (women's issues, the welfare of families and

children, health care, and education). First, for those legislators serving on education committees, their strong interest in legislation focusing on education is clearly apparent. Large proportions of women and men in both chambers who served on education committees—and much larger proportions than for legislators overall—reported that an education bill was their top legislative priority for the current session. Women legislators on education committees were, however, not more likely than male legislators on these committees to have a top priority bill that focused on education.

The subject matter of health and human services committees is more diffuse than that of education committees, a fact seemingly apparent in the findings presented in Table 6. Women legislators on health and human services committees in both chambers were more likely than all women legislators to have bills focusing on health care as their top priority legislation. However, they also were more likely than women legislators generally to give top priority to bills dealing with women’s issues and with the welfare of families and children—issue areas that, for the most part, would seem to fit under the general rubric of “human services.”⁵ Women state representatives on health and human services committees were more likely than their male counterparts to have top priority bills in all three issue areas—health care, women’s issues, and the welfare of families and children—while women state senators on health and human services gave greater priority than their male counterparts to legislation on women’s issues and the welfare of families and children, but not to legislation on health care.

Discussion and Conclusions

Two major patterns and sets of conclusions emerge from the analysis presented in this

paper. The first pattern is one of similarity and convergence in the committee assignments of women and men serving in state legislatures. Fewer gender differences in committee assignments were apparent in 2001 than in 1988, and even for health and human services committees and education committees where gender differences continued to be evident in 2001, differences were less pronounced than in 1988. With the one exception of rules committees in state senates, women in 2001 were just as likely as men to receive appointments to the so-called “prestige” committees. And contrary to the findings for 1988, women state legislators in 2001 were not more dissatisfied overall with their committee assignments than were their male colleagues. Nor were women legislators in 2001 more likely than their male counterparts to desire an appointment to a committee other than the committees on which they served. Moreover, women and men who were newcomers to state senates and state houses were remarkably similar in their levels of satisfaction with their committee assignments and their desire to be assigned to a committee other than those on which they served.

The analysis in this paper offers no evidence that legislative leaders in the early 21st century are engaging in gender stereotyping and assigning women to committees that deal with subject matter in which women have traditionally been considered to have special expertise. In fact, to the extent that legislative leaders are assigning women to committees contrary to women’s preferences, they seem to be assigning them to prestige committees, perhaps in an attempt to insure that these committees have some female representation.

However, despite all the evidence for similarity and convergence in the committee assignments of women and men, some very critical gender differences are apparent. Women continue to be significantly more likely than men to serve on two types of committees—education

committees and health and human services committees. The relative overrepresentation of women on education and health and human services committees constitutes the second major pattern of findings to emerge from the analysis in this paper.

Women seem largely to serve on these committees by choice. Few women on education committees and notably fewer women than men on health and human services committees reported that they were initially dissatisfied with their appointments. Moreover, proportionately more women than men not serving on education and health and human services committees expressed a desire to be appointed to these committees. Also, sizable proportions of women serving on these committees reported that the work of the committee interested them more than the work of other committees on which they served, and with the exception of state representatives on education committees, women were more likely than men to say this.

The women who served on education committees much more often than women legislators overall gave priority to legislation that focused on education, and women legislators who served on health and human services committees more often than women legislators generally (as well as more often than their male counterparts on health and human services committees) had as their top legislative priority a bill that focused on health care, the welfare of children and families, or women's issues.

In sum, the findings of this analysis show that women legislators are more likely than men to serve on education and health and human services committees. They want to be on these committees. And once on these committees, they work on legislation relevant to the substantive focus of these committees. This cluster of findings suggests that women legislators are, in fact, using their committee appointments as a means to pursue their interests in education and in health care and human services. And the end result is that women legislators give more attention

and priority to these issues than their male colleagues do. It is because of the role that committees play in facilitating the expression of these gender-related interests that committee assignments constitute one of the underexplored links in our understanding of gender differences in policy-related impact.

Notes

1. The men were sampled in this manner to insure that we actually compared women and men who served in similar political circumstances and not women and men from states with very different political and legislative environments.
2. There are a number of possible reasons for the lower response rates in 2001 than in 1988, including differences in the survey research firms which administered the study, the greater numbers of legislatures in session while we were conducting the survey in 2001, the increased proliferation of voice mail and answering machines making it more difficult to reach respondents, the increase in telemarketing, and the increased rate of turnover in legislatures with fewer legislators consequently aware of the Eagleton Institute of Politics (the parent organization of CAWP whom respondents were told was conducting the study). However, the major factor leading to lower response rates in 2001 seems to have been the sheer proliferation of surveys of legislators not only by academics, but also by other entities and organizations. Legislators reported that they were asked to participate in several other surveys concurrently with ours.
3. At the state legislative level, of course, the importance and function of these committees vary from state to state.
4. Committee types and titles vary greatly from one state to another, and there were a number of types of committees less commonly found in state legislatures that are not included in Table 1. Although results are not presented, there were no significant gender differences in appointments to these less prevalent types of committees.
5. Issues such as abortion and women's health were included in the women's issues category even though they could also have been classified as health care issues.

References

- Abzug, Bella. 1972. *Bella! Ms. Abzug Goes to Washington*. New York: Saturday Review Press.
- Arnold, Laura W., and Barbara M. King. 2002. "Women, Committees, and Institutional Change in the Senate." In *Women Transforming Congress*, ed. Cindy Simon Rosenthal. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Carroll, Susan J. 2001. "Representing Women: Women State Legislators as Agents of Policy-Related Change." In *The Impact of Women in Public Office*, ed. Susan J. Carroll. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP). 2006. "Women in the U.S. Congress 2006." Fact Sheet. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics.
- Chisholm, Shirley. 1970. *Unbought and Unbossed*. New York: Avon Books.
- Considine, Mark, and Iva Ellen Deutchman. 1994. "The Gendering of Political Institutions: A Comparison of American and Australian State Legislators." *Social Science Quarterly* 75(December): 854-66.
- Diamond, Irene. 1977. *Sex Roles in the State House*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Dodson, Debra L., and Susan J. Carroll. 1991. *Reshaping the Agenda: Women in State Legislatures*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for the American Woman and Politics.
- Dolan, Kathleen, and Lynne E. Ford. 1997. "Change and Continuity among Women State Legislators: Evidence from Three Decades." *Political Research Quarterly* 50(March): 137-151.
- Duverger, Maurice. 1955. *The Political Role of Women*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Fenno, Richard F., Jr. 1973. *Congressmen in Committees*. Boston: Little, Brown.

- Friedman, Sally. 1996. "House Committee Assignments of Women and Minority Newcomers, 1965-1994." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 21(1): 73-81.
- Frisch, Scott A., and Sean Q. Kelly. 2003. "A Place at the Table: Women's Committee Requests and Women's Committee Assignments in the U.S. House." *Women & Politics* 25(3): 1-26.
- Gertzog, Irwin. 1995. *Congressional Women: Their Recruitment, Integration, and Behavior*, 2nd edition. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Hedge, David, James Button, and Mary Spear. 1996. "Accounting for the Quality of Black Legislative Life: The View from the States." *American Journal of Political Science* 40(February): 82-98.
- Kirkpatrick, Jeane J. 1974. *Political Woman*. New York: Basic Books.
- Norton, Noelle. 1995. "Women, It's Not Enough to Be Elected: Committee Position Makes a Difference." In *Gender Power, Leadership, and Governance*, ed. Georgia Duerst-Lahti and Rita Mae Kelly. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Norton, Noelle. 2002. "Transforming Policy from the Inside: Participation in Committee." In *Women Transforming Congress*, ed. Cindy Simon Rosenthal. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Saint-Germain, Michelle A. 1989. "Does Their Difference Make A Difference?: The Impact of Women on Public Policy in the Arizona Legislature." *Social Science Quarterly* 70: 956-68.
- Smith, Steven S., and Christopher J. Deering. 1997. *Committees in Congress*, 3rd edition. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly.
- Squire, Peeverill. 2000. "Uncontested Seats in State Legislative Elections." *Legislative Studies*

Quarterly 25(February): 131-46.

Swers, Michele L. 2002, *The Difference Women Make: The Policy Impact of Women in Congress*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Thomas, Sue. 1994. *How Women Legislate*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Table 1: Gender Differences in Selected Standing Committee Assignments for State Legislators, 2001 and 1988

Committee Types	2001						1988					
	Senate			House			Senate			House		
	Women %	Men %	tau _b	Women %	Men %	tau _b	Women %	Men %	tau _b	Women %	Men %	tau _b
Appropriations & Budget	19.9	21.3	-.02	19.0	14.9	.05	20.5	19.7	.01	15.6	16.7	-.01
Finance & Revenue	21.3	20.0	.02	10.1	13.2	-.05	22.1	40.1	-.20***	12.7	15.2	-.04
Judiciary	22.2	23.3	-.01	15.8	18.5	-.04	32.8	24.8	.09	18.8	19.0	.00
Rules	7.4	13.3	-.10*	5.4	7.0	-.03	10.8	13.9	-.05	10.0	8.3	.03
Ways & Means	6.5	7.3	-.02	8.7	7.3	.03	5.1	3.6	.04	8.0	8.9	-.02
Banking, Business, & Commerce	19.0	18.0	.01	12.2	15.9	-.05	28.7	34.3	-.06	24.9	26.4	-.02
Health & Human Services	35.2	18.0	.19***	26.4	14.6	.14***	40.0	10.9	.32***	31.5	13.2	.22***
Education	30.6	22.7	.09*	25.0	18.2	.08**	30.3	19.7	.12**	22.9	16.1	.09**
Government Affairs	24.1	20.0	.05	15.8	17.2	-.02	38.5	29.9	.09*	24.1	25.3	-.01
Environment	16.7	22.7	-.08	13.6	15.9	-.03	20.0	21.9	-.02	17.1	17.2	.00
Transportation	15.3	18.7	-.05	10.6	11.9	-.02	12.8	18.2	-.08	10.5	15.8	-.08**
Agriculture	13.0	14.7	-.02	7.3	9.3	-.04	9.2	14.6	-.08	10.7	9.5	.02
N=	216	150		368	302		195	137		410	348	

Note: Columns may sum to more than 100% because most legislators served on more than one committee.

- * Significant at .10 level.
- ** Significant at .05 level.
- *** Significant at .001 level.

Table 2: Gender Differences in Health and Human Services and Education Committee Assignments for State Legislators Controlling for Party, Tenure in Office, and Professionalization of Legislature, 2001

	Member of Health and Human Services Committee						Member of Education Committee					
	Senate			House			Senate			House		
	Women %	Men %	tau _b or tau _c	Women %	Men %	tau _b or tau _c	Women %	Men %	tau _b or tau _c	Women %	Men %	tau _b or tau _c
Party												
Republican	37.5	18.4	.21**	25.4	16.8	.11+	31.9	22.4	.06	25.6	22.5	.03
Democrat	35.3	15.7	.21***	26.9	11.7	.18***	30.1	24.3	.11	23.8	15.6	.10+
Tenure^a												
Veteran	37.9	16.0	.24***	26.9	10.0	.21***	31.4	19.1	.14*	25.0	18.7	.08
Newcomer	30.3	20.0	.12	25.0	25.3	.00	28.9	29.1	.00	25.0	18.0	.08+
Professionalization of Legislature^b												
Low				17.2	14.3	.04				17.2	13.3	.05
Moderate				25.3	12.5	.16**				25.8	20.6	.06
High				43.2	19.7	.25**				35.1	21.3	.15+

+ Significant at .10 level.

* Significant at .05 level.

** Significant at .01 level.

*** Significant at .001 level.

^a For state senators, newcomers are defined as those who have served in the state senate for 4 years or less; for state representatives, newcomers are defined as those who have served in the state house for 2 years or less.

^b States were categorized as low, moderate, or high in professionalization of the legislature based on the measure developed by Peverill Squire 2000. Squire's measure is a composite that takes into account compensation, number of days in session, and number of staff. The high and low categories include 12 states each and the remaining 26 are in the moderate category, consistent with the idea in the literature that most states are neither highly professionalized nor citizen legislatures but rather in the middle between these two extremes. Because senates are more similar across states in their levels of professionalization while lower houses vary greatly, data are only presented for lower houses.

Table 3: Gender Differences in Dissatisfaction with Committee Assignments for State

Legislators, 2001

	Senate			House		
	Women %	Men %	tau _b	Women %	Men %	tau _b
Dissatisfied with a Committee Assignment						
All Legislators	37.9	33.3	.05	35.0	32.6	.03
Newcomers	38.2	43.6	-.06	45.6	38.2	.08
Desires a Different Committee						
All Legislators	49.5	44.4	.05	51.8	50.0	.02
Newcomers	70.1	71.4	-.01	67.6	64.5	.03

* Significant at .05 level.

** Significant at .01 level.

Table 4: Gender Differences in Proportions of Legislators on Various Committees Who Initially Did Not Want to Be Assigned to Those Committees

Committees	Senate			House		
	Women %	Men %	tau _b	Women %	Men %	tau _b
Appropriations & Budget	9.3	0.0	.21**	5.7	13.3	-.13
Finance & Revenue	10.9	3.3	.14	16.2	5.0	.13
Judiciary	25.0	8.6	.21**	8.6	16.1	-.11
Rules	25.0	5.0	.29*	5.0	14.3	-.16
Ways & Means	0.0	0.0	--	6.3	9.1	-.05
Banking, Business, & Commerce	17.1	14.8	.03	17.8	6.3	.18*
Health & Human Services	10.5	18.5	-.11	12.4	25.0	-.16*
Education	1.5	5.9	-.12	1.1	1.8	-.03

* Significant at .10 level.

** Significant at .05 level.

Table 5: Gender Differences in Preferences for State Legislators, 2001, Who Wanted to Be Assigned to a Committee on Which They Did Not Serve

Committee	Senate			House		
	Women %	Men %	tau _b	Women %	Men %	tau _b
Appropriations & Budget	13.1	20.6	.10	17.9	24.3	.08
Finance & Revenue	18.7	22.1	-.04	11.1	9.9	.02
Judiciary	8.4	10.3	-.03	11.6	6.6	.09+
Rules	2.8	1.5	.04	3.2	2.0	.04
Ways & Means	3.7	8.8	-.11	8.9	8.6	.01
Banking, Business, & Commerce	6.5	17.6	-.17*	8.4	13.2	.08
Health & Human Services	14.0	5.9	.13+	14.2	3.3	.19***
Education	21.5	13.2	.10	23.7	13.8	.12*
N=	107	68		190	152	

- + Significant at .10 level.
- * Significant at .05 level.
- ** Significant at .01 level.
- *** Significant at .001 level.

Table 6: Focus of Top Priority Bills for State Legislators, 2001, on Education and Health and Human Services Committees

Priority Bill's Focus	On Education Committee				On Health and Human Services Committee				All Legislators			
	Senate		House		Senate		House		Senate		House	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
Women's Issues	1.5	--	9.0	3.9	9.3	--	15.8	7.1	4.7	2.7	11.0	4.1
Welfare of Family and Children	12.3	9.1	12.4	9.8	18.7	11.5	15.8	9.5	8.5	5.5	8.4	5.1
Health Care	9.2	3.0	9.0	2.0	16.0	19.2	18.9	2.4	11.3	8.9	10.7	6.2
Education	40.0	48.5	33.7	33.3	10.7	11.5	8.4	11.9	17.4	18.5	18.0	15.8