

# **So Women Bring Home the Bacon: Are Congresswomen Rewarded For Their Performance By Being Reelected at Higher Rates? An Analysis of Female Incumbent House Members.**

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*A review of the literature on women in the House reveals that Congresswomen gradually passed a threshold, starting as single-term members who over decades transitioned into competitive, successful, but vastly underrepresented legislators. The literature on this topic has posited that once in office women will achieve the basic goals of a Congress member, such as bringing more federal spending home to districts and being more active on roll call votes, better than a Congressman. When gender-biased selection is present, women who are elected to office will on average perform better than men because of the unique challenges faced by women in the electoral process, which weeds out all but the strongest female candidates, subsequently leading them to becoming more successful members; this combined with the incumbency advantage should logically result in superior performance when it comes to reelection. The position of this essay is that we can expect women to perform equal to or better than their male counterparts when running for reelection because Congresswomen's superior performance in the House will translate into higher reelection rates.*

## **So Women Bring Home the Bacon**

Recent research indicates that when gender-based selection is present, women who are elected to office will on average perform better than men (Anzia & Berry, 2011). This hypothesis, combined with the observed effects of incumbency advantage, should result in women performing superior to men in reelection bids. However, research also suggests that Congresswomen will lose their competitive advantage when the gender-biased barriers facing women are reduced or removed (Anzia & Berry, 2011). In running for reelection,

Congresswomen have a relative advantage against other candidates as the incumbents; however the two hypotheses mentioned above run in contrast to one another, begging the question that if the women examined by Anzia and Berry (2011) are superior because of the demands of the electoral process, can we expect them to perform better than men in reelection bids? The position of this essay is that we can expect women to perform equal to or better than their male counterparts when running for reelection because Congresswomen's superior performance in the House will translate into higher reelection rates. A comparison of reelection rates between Congressmen and Congresswomen would help to confirm this hypothesis. However, given that women have historically been - and continue to be - a minority in Congress, the research specifically studying reelection rates of Congresswomen has been limited. Through an examination of existing research on Congresswomen, I will attempt to articulate an answer to the question: can we expect women to outperform men in reelection?

Recent research shows that women are better legislators<sup>1</sup> than their male counterparts because of the different processes and obstacles they are faced with, which draws out only the best of female candidates (Anzia & Berry, 2011). Anzia and Berry (2011) found that Congresswomen bring home 9% more federal funding to their districts and are more active in roll-call votes than Congressmen are. They explain this superior performance by virtue of the more competitive electoral process that women face, also positing that if the barriers faced by female candidates fall, women will lose their competitive advantage (Anzia & Berry, 2011). If the women examined by Anzia and Berry (2011) are superior because of the demands of the electoral process, do they perform better than men in reelection bids?

The literature on Congresswomen has focused on supply and participatory aspects when there is a need to analyze female performance post-election once enjoying the incumbency advantage (Lawless & Pearson, 2008; Rule, 1981; Smith & Fox, 2001). The literature that does analyze the reelection of Congresswomen suggests that they fully enjoy the incumbency advantage and are successful in their reelections (Anzia & Berry 2011). If Congresswomen are reelected at higher rates than Congressmen, their constituents apparently are capable of appreciating and recognizing the superior performance of Congresswomen compared to men,

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<sup>1</sup> Superior legislators are defined as being more successful in delivering federal spending to their districts and sponsoring legislation. This definition is subsumed from Anzia & Berry's (2011) concept of what makes a legislator better, for the purposes of my article. Anzia & Berry characterize these two qualities as being the basic goals of legislators in the U.S House. For further explanation and justification for use of these two indicators, see Anzia & Berry, 2011, p. 482.

and if Congresswomen are reelected at lower rates than Congressmen, it is likely that gender-bias continues to make the electoral process difficult for women, even for those who have demonstrated their capability as Congress members. On the other hand, if incumbents of both sexes are reelected at the same rates, one can deduce that the incumbency advantage protects Congress members equally despite differences in pork barreling, the appropriation of government funds for local expenditure in a representative's district, and other performance indicators on which women outperform men. Based on the hypotheses in the literature on Congresswomen, it is reasonable to expect Congresswomen to be reelected at higher rates than Congressmen.

### **Literature Review**

Literature focusing on women in Congress began in the 1950's, and the majority of that literature focuses on the role that widows played as replacements for their deceased Congressmen husbands. This body of literature studying widows in Congress is far more descriptive in nature, analyzing the historical study of role perceptions for women in Congress (Werner, 1966; Kincaid, 1978). Particular attention was paid to the biographic information and background comparison of these women, especially widows. The focus on widows is attributed to the practice of replacing deceased Congressmen with their wives, around which has risen a stereotype of widows being apolitical "placeholders" until another male candidate can be found (Kincaid, 1978). Widows were perceived as being advantaged by sympathy vote and voter recognition of their names (Bullock & Heys, 1972). One colorful observation of this phenomenon is that "for women aspiring to serve in Congress, the best husband has been a dead husband" (Palmer & Simon, 2003, p. 128). Reelection was not a primary consideration for these early widow Congresswomen, the majority of which would not serve more than a single term (Bullock & Heys, 1972).

One of the most comprehensive analyses of women in Congress during this early period is Werner's (1966) examination of biographical information to answer questions about the overall experiences of the 70 women who had served in the House up to that point. Werner found that Congresswomen tended to be past their child-rearing years<sup>2</sup>, highly educated for women of

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<sup>2</sup> Data from Werner's (1966) article indicates that women are past child-bearing and child-rearing years after age 50.

the period, with backgrounds in the fine arts; and that “while the traditional road of the congresswoman in the 1920's and 1930's was that of the ‘widow's succession’, the number elected by popular vote has been increasing in the last two decades, and with it the length of their tenure in office” (Werner, 1966, p. 29). The trend had been for most women to attain their seat in Congress as widows until the early 1950's, though the number of ‘regularly elected’ women who acquired their seats by their own merit steadily increased, and by the early 1960's “more than half of all congresswomen were re-elected for a full second term and a little over a third were twice re-elected and served six years or more” (Werner, 1966, p. 24). Werner posits that the reasons for the minority role of women in the House are in part due to a system and culture of bias against women that has historically been inculcated in both men and women.

Analyzing the early literature on women, it appears that Congresswomen were not initially superior to Congressmen and that their performance in reelection slowly improved over time, with further inclusion and increasing numbers in the House (Kincaid, 1978; Werner, 1966). Though Congresswomen were superior in terms of education and past job experience compared to the average woman of the time, their superiority over other male Congress members did not develop until later in the twentieth century (Werner, 1966).

Much of the literature on Congresswomen in the latter half of the twentieth century analyzes the differences between the experiences of widows and those female candidates who were regularly elected. Bullock and Heys (1972) analyze the difference in Congresswomen's experiences by comparing the reelection rates and norm adherence for regularly elected women and widows. From 1917 to 1970, of the 67 Congresswomen in the House, 52% of them were regularly elected, and of those regularly elected women most had backgrounds that were similar to Congressmen in that they were more educated and possessed previous political experience, unlike widows (Bullock & Heys, 1972). The observation that Congresswomen's backgrounds gradually became more similar to the backgrounds of Congressmen is one echoed in later works on Congresswomen (Thompson, 1980). We can also see the overall trend of women gradually improving into better Congress members. The regularly elected women were more likely than widows to pursue reelection and were reelected at a slightly higher frequency (77%), than widows (71%); incumbent congressmen in comparison, were reelected on average more than 90% (Bullock & Heys, 1972). “The expectation that the regularly elected were more likely than widows to see Congress as a career was substantiated by the greater frequency with which the

former sought reelection...widows generally were less likely to remain in Congress more than a single term” (Bullock & Heys, 1972, p. 423).

Though regularly elected Congresswomen were beginning to be reelected at higher frequencies than widows, there still existed a substantial difference between the reelection rates of Congressmen versus Congresswomen. Incumbent Congressmen were reelected on average 13% more than incumbent Congresswomen. Though Bullock & Heys (1972) analyze the reelection rates of regularly elected men, women, and widows, it would be interesting to apply Anzia and Berry’s (2011) analysis to this time period, in which the actual performance of these groups could be explored. Were Congresswomen of this period superior to men in terms of the basic goals of Congress members, bringing funding back to districts and participating in floor votes, despite the lackluster performance in being reelected?

From the 1970’s to the 1980’s, the literature on women in Congress shifts from a focus on the analysis of widows versus regularly elected congresswomen to a focus on the supply of female candidates and their access to political office, analyzing women at primary and general elections, with the main question being: why do so few women run for political office? Rule (1981) finds that women’s political recruitment is highly dependent on differing sociopolitical factors. According to Rule, “a potential candidate's decision to seek office depends upon the political culture which limits or offers opportunities for persons with the appropriate eligibility attributes. A potential candidate must calculate whether or not to risk nomination by taking into account the closed or open nature of the particular political structure” (Rule, 1981, 60), a point also discussed by Anzia and Berry (2011). Their thesis is based on the observation that if women perceive there to be gender discrimination in the electoral process, or if they underestimate their qualifications, then fewer women will run, the implication being that only the most qualified females will run for office (Anzia & Berry, 2011).

Moving beyond women-only study analyses, Dabelko and Herrnson (1997) use campaign data to determine what differences, if any, exists between the type of campaigns run by male versus female candidates in response to the record breaking election year in 1992 when more women were elected to Congress than ever before. Dabelko and Herrnson find that “little systematic support exists for the argument that differences in campaign styles explain the high success rates enjoyed by female House candidates” (1997, p. 133). If women make more successful House members, bring more funding home to their districts, and do not exhibit

fundamental differences between male and female campaigns, then we can expect women to achieve similar, if not higher, reelection rates than their male counterparts.

Another theme discussed in the literature is whether female perspectives were fundamentally different than the male's perspective, implying that because "women have different policy concerns than men, engage in different types of political conversations, and have different political experiences, women can be expected to wage campaigns that differ from those of men" (Dabelko & Herrnson, 1997, p. 122). There were no significant differences between the strategies used by women and men; the major differences that did appear could be attributed to incumbency as opposed to gender (Dabelko & Herrnson, 1997). Women also differed substantively when it came to campaigning on social issues (Dabelko & Herrnson, 1997).

In the analysis of access to political office, some of the literature on Congresswomen differs in the degree to which women were advantaged or disadvantaged in open seat contests. Smith and Fox (2001) find that "An advantage for women candidates is more pronounced in open-seat contests. In open-seat races, women voters, regardless of their education levels, more strongly support women candidates. Overall, candidate gender was not significant to male voters" (Smith & Fox, 2001, p. 205). However Lawless and Pearson (2008) posit that women face more competition in all cases; regardless of whether they run as incumbents, challengers, or for open seats. Bias cannot be solely attributed to causing women's underrepresentation according to Lawless and Pearson (2008), who analyzed the gender dynamics of the congressional primary process to discover alternative reasons for women's underrepresentation. Their paradoxical findings of women's low entry rates and high victory rates in congressional primaries, indicate that primary election dynamics affect women's initial decision to run for office (Lawless & Pearson, 2008). Only the most qualified women must be willing to run and women have to be better than their male counterparts in order to fare equally well in the primary process, an observation also shared by Anzia & Berry (2011). It appears that despite low entry levels and gender bias that female candidates face upon entry into the electoral process, only the most capable women are elected and subsequently become superior candidates, as evidenced by their high victory rates, Increased federal spending and projects brought back to constituents, and we should expect that women will achieve higher reelection rates because, firstly, we can expect their superior performance in achieving the basic goals of House members to be extended

to reelection; and secondly, constituents likely recognize their superior performance and vote accordingly.

Women also face more primary competition than men do, partly because “potential competitors, recruiters, and gatekeepers consider women more vulnerable”, which means that women will draw a larger crowd both in their own primaries and in the other parties’ primaries when they run as incumbents (Lawless & Pearson, 2008, p. 69). The authors also find a similar trend when examining the other party’s primary, that women are significantly more likely to enter primaries to challenge a female incumbent of the other party (Lawless & Pearson, 2008). The threat of partisan challengers for the majority of female incumbents facing primary challenges is minimized by the incumbency advantage, name recognition, and the perquisites of office (Lawless & Pearson, 2008). This latter observation acknowledges how Congresswomen are generally protected by the same benefits of incumbency as men are. When analyzing data about women’s victory rates and levels of primary competition it appears that the gender neutral victory rates are not the result of a gender neutral primary process, but are rather a result of female candidates of superior caliber that surface (Lawless & Pearson, 2008).

Lawless and Pearson’s (2008) contributions lend more support to the idea that incumbent women can be expected to perform better than men in reelection. Despite facing more competition, the women who are elected to office achieve high victory rates and are a superior caliber of candidate. Those characteristics coupled with the incumbency advantage, name recognition, and the prerequisites of office, indicate that we can expect Congresswomen to at least perform as well as, if not better, than their male counterparts in the House.

Another central theme in the literature on women in Congress is the enhancement of female participation via increasing the descriptive representation of women in office. Authors, such as Lawless (2004), stress the symbolic significance of including more women in high level, visible political positions. Using National Election Study data, Lawless (2004) attempts to ascertain the actual benefits that symbolic representation has on constituents and finds that there was not much evidence of symbolic effects. Lawless (2004) also finds that when female constituents are represented by Congresswomen, they tended to offer more positive evaluations of their representatives but this did not affect political attitudes or behavior of the female constituents. Reingold and Harrell (2010) also find that there is doubt whether women in prominent public offices truly enhances women’s political engagement; rather, the authors

suggest that it is mostly female candidates of the same party that enhance female constituents' interest in politics.

A substantial portion of the literature on Congresswomen also focuses on the influence that gender has on the representation provided. The conclusions on the influence that gender has on representation is mixed; Jeydel and Taylor (2003) argue that female House members were not less effective when it came to legislative effectiveness, referring to the ability to turn policy preferences into law, but found that that effectiveness is more a product of seniority and membership in significant House bodies. Another aspect of performance analyzed are gender differences in speech participation on the floor of the House; Pearson and Dancey (2011) hypothesize that congresswomen of both parties speak at greater rates than congressmen in order to overcome the challenges associated with being a minority and found that Congresswomen do participate at higher rates, "demonstrating that congresswomen's participation in legislative debate increases their visibility and enhances women's substantive representation" (Pearson & Dancey, 2011, p. 910). This finding further supports the hypothesis that women will outperform men in reelection; in order to overcome the challenges of being a minority, women are pushed to participate more so than men in the House, subsequently enhancing their visibility and representative capacity to their constituents, which aids them when seeking reelection.

The question of whether women are substantively different when it comes to policy has also been asked; Swers (1998) finds that after examining the voting records of both male and female representatives, "women will not necessarily exhibit a more liberal ideology than their male counterparts on all issues; however, the more directly an issue affects women, the more likely it is that women will vote together across party lines" (Swers, 1998, p. 435). Gender is secondary to a Congresswoman's main priorities, such as constituency concerns, ideology, and party factors. This point is validated by Newman and Wolbrecht's (2012) findings that a gender gap in dyadic policy representation was absent in the House members they examined; what they did find is that a Democratic majority improves women's dyadic representation, but having a female representative does not.

Other literature on women focuses in part on how the structure of Congressional institutions is gender-race biased. There is a much more extensive body of literature about women in state legislatures than about women in Congress. However, there is an overall gap in the literature in regard to the study of Congresswomen running for reelection. One analysis that



does partly analyze incumbent Congresswomen running for reelection is Palmer and Simon's observation that the value of a House seat increases with the number of terms served, increasing with seniority of the House member (Palmer & Simon, 2003). They also make the general observation, shared by other works on incumbency, that running against a safe incumbent of the opposite party is undesirable (Palmer & Simon, 2003). Following the implications of this latter observation, as long as Congresswomen continue to perform superior to men, such as participating at greater rates on the floor and bringing more funding home to their districts, they will continue to be safely reelected. We can also expect Congresswomen's superior performance to translate into superior reelection rates.

### **Conclusion**

Anzia and Berry (2011) posit that Congresswomen will lose their competitive advantage when the barriers facing women are reduced or removed; however, based on the literature reviewed, contemporary Congresswomen extend their superior performance to reelection as well. I was motivated by Anzia and Berry's (2011) article to study the reelection of incumbent Congresswomen and, based on the research, found that if Congresswomen are superior due to the demands of the electoral process, then we can expect them to perform better than men in reelection bids because Congresswomen's superior performance in the House will translate into higher reelection rates.

Briefly, the main takeaways from the literature on women in Congress are as follows. The vast majority of early literature focuses exclusively on widows who would take their deceased husbands seats and is mostly descriptive, analyzing the biographical differences and pedigree of Congresswomen. For the early Congresswomen widows, reelection was not so much a factor, and they usually would not serve for more than a single term (Bullock & Heys, 1972). Unlike later literature, early analyses focused on women who were not regularly elected. Though the majority of early Congresswomen were widows filling in for their husbands, the number of regularly elected women steadily increased, as did the length of their tenure in office (Werner, 1966). It appears from the literature that Congresswomen were not initially superior to Congressmen and that their performance in reelection is something which slowly improved over time, with the further inclusion and increasing numbers of women in the House. Although Congresswomen were superior as far as education and past job experience when compared to

average woman of the time, their superiority to other male Congress members did not develop until later in the twentieth century. And from the literature we can gather that Congresswomen initially began to outperform widows in the House, though on average the regularly elected women lagged behind the men's reelection rates by 13%.

Another key theme is the focus on women's access to political office, in which there is a focus on the supply aspect, and the performance of female candidates at primary and general elections. Another theme is the analysis on how to enhance female participation and political engagement, as well as the symbolic importance of having women in Congress.

The last theme of the literature is the analysis of gendered differences in the performance of Congress members, such as participation on the floor, bringing pork home to districts, and gender ideology. From the literature, we have also established that there is no difference in campaign styles and no significant differences in preferences for female oriented policies between male and female Congress members.

The literature has, up until recent times, been severely limited due to the low numbers of women serving in Congress. Though there was a significant increase in the number of women serving as of the 1990's, there has still been a gap in the literature as far as analyzing the performance of incumbent Congresswomen. Again, the fact that women have been, and continue to be, a minority in Congress, has limited the study on this topic. However this study has not been adequately hashed out by any research to date. Authors have partly studied incumbent Congresswomen in relation to their own work, and found that seniority, party ideology, and geographical location of the district have the largest impacts on a Congresswoman's reelection. Incumbency literature does not recognize or offer analysis as to the reelection experiences of Congresswomen or any possible differences that might exist between male and female Congress members running for reelection. The aim with this literature review has been to demonstrate that we can expect women to perform better than men in reelection bids, despite the gap in the literature on Congresswomen; hopefully with the increase in women that are both elected to Congress and run for reelection, more study can be conducted on this issue.

According to the literature on Congresswomen, we can see a transition from women failing to pursue or win reelection to becoming adept, and even superior Congress members then men are. Congresswomen as a group gradually passed a threshold where they started becoming superior House members, not just to widows, but to Congressmen as well, subsequently leading

them to becoming more successful members, who brought more federal pork home to districts and more were active on roll call votes, and it is logical that they would extend this superior performance when it comes to reelection.

The women who are elected into Congress are superior candidates because of the unique challenges faced by women in the electoral process, weeding out all but the strongest female candidates. The literature on this topic has demonstrated that the decision whether or not to run depends of whether women perceive there to be gender discrimination in the electoral process, and that once in office women will achieve the basic goals of a Congress member better than a man will.

With the 2014 elections, there are currently over 80 women in the House, comprising about 20% of the total. With more women serving in Congress than ever before, what trends might be anticipated in the future in regard to these women being reelected? Given the findings of past research on this topic and this essay's hypothesis that Congresswomen's superior performance will result in superior reelection rates, there is the possibility if gender equality in the political selection process is attained and women no longer perceive gender bias in the electoral process, that women will lose their edge and fail to consistently outperform their male counterparts in the House. This field has a lot of room for development, and it remains to be seen whether or not Congresswomen can sustain the momentum of superiority.

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