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## THE IMPACT OF WOMEN LEGISLATORS ON INTRODUCTION OF SOCIAL LEGISLATION INTO A SOUTHERN STATE HOUSE

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### ABSTRACT

The study investigated the interest of male and female legislators in social legislation as measured by the number of bills each group introduced. Legislators included in the study were the entire female population of the North Carolina General Assembly House of Representatives serving between January and July 1981, and an equal number of their male colleagues randomly selected. Comparisons of the female and male legislators in the study criteria such as number of legislative terms served, relative power of committees on which they served, number of committee chairpersonships and independent rankings and effectiveness by colleagues, lobbyists and the media revealed that the male legislators lead by significant margins on all criteria. Results of the study were that the women introduced more bills and more social legislation. Of the 159 bills introduced by the women, 64 percent were identified as social legislation, while of the 111 bills introduced by the men, only 37 percent were identified as social legislation. The designations of social legislation or non-social legislation were submitted to a jury of experts for validation. Recommendations were made for further study of the interests of male and female legislators in more specific content areas.

### Introduction

Women have been increasingly active in many decision making areas of society and are more visible in state legislatures across the nation. The number of women elected to state legislatures has tripled just in the last ten years until there is at least one woman serving in each state house and only four states failing to have a woman serving in the state senate.<sup>1</sup> When the first Conference of Women State Legislators was held in 1972, there were 344 women legislators in the country representing only 5.5 percent of state legislators. By the second Conference of Women Legislators in 1982, their numbers had increased to 908 or 12.1 percent of all state legislators.<sup>2</sup> Yet it has been reported that the political participation of women has had little impact on the formulation of policy.<sup>3</sup>

### Background and Significance

Increasing numbers of middle-aged women are becoming involved in politics resulting from earlier trends toward marrying and bearing children at a comparatively younger age than present which enables significant numbers of women now reaching middle age to pursue activities outside the home with increasing

frequency. Newer trends toward later marriages and fewer children, combined with the increasing numbers of women with advanced education, are creating greater numbers of bright, creative and energetic younger women committed to political careers. This overall growth in the political activity of women is enhanced by changing attitudes about families and relationships and about the acceptability of political activity by women.<sup>4</sup>

Little serious political analysis of women's attitudes and behaviors had been published prior to the mid 1970's.<sup>5</sup> A 1977 study involving local representatives in Connecticut did reveal some significant differences in self-expressed expertise between male and female participants on "Social Problems" with 53.3 of the women expressing the belief that they had expertise in that area as compared to only 18.2 percent of the men.<sup>6</sup> This finding of increased self-expressed expertise on social problems by local women representatives as compared with their male colleagues would seem to indicate that increasing numbers of women in political office would have an impact in that area. To investigate this potential impact, a study was conducted comparing the number of pieces of social legislation (bills) introduced by a group of female legislators and an equal number of their male counterparts.

#### Research Setting

North Carolina is one of the seven states governed by a legislature which meets only in odd-numbered years, except for a brief session each even-numbered year to make minor budget adjustments to maintain the state's constitutionally required balanced budget. The North Carolina General Assembly is composed of a fifty member Senate and a hundred and twenty member House of Representatives. Due to a limited number of female senators during the 1981 General Assembly (only three) when the study was conducted, the study was limited to the House where there were 19 female representatives. This is in line with studies that show women are twice as likely to serve in a state House of Representatives than in a State Senate.<sup>7</sup> Since House districts are smaller in size and greater in number, it is fairly common for state legislators to begin their legislative careers in the House. It seems common for state legislators to begin their legislative careers in the House. It seems logical that women, who are new as a force in the political arena, are presently represented here in greater numbers.

#### Procedures

The entire population of nineteen female House members (16%) were included in the study with an equal number of their male colleagues selected in a random drawing from the 101 male legislators (84%) using a non-replacement sampling technique. The Daily Bulletin, a digest of actions by the N. C. General Assembly published by the Institute of Government of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was used to make the initial determination of bills relevant to the study.

Any bill introduced by a legislator included in the study was labeled social legislation if it was initially assigned to one of the following committees: Aging, Appropriations - Human Resources, Commissions and Institutions for the Deaf and Blind, Corrections, Education, Health, Higher Education, Human Resources or

#### Mental Health.

Additional bills were identified as social legislation by a three person panel of experts, consisting of two registered lobbyists and one volunteer (citizen) lobbyist representing human service professional and employee associations. Panelists received all the bills introduced by legislators in the study which were not assigned to a designated committee. All bills included in the study were unanimously labeled "social legislation" by this expert jury. All bills included in the study were Public Bills which have statewide impact.

#### Results

There were 270 public bills included in the study of these 111 or 41% were introduced by the female legislators. The total number of public bills introduced by a single legislator ranged from one to 31 for the male legislators and from one to 19 for the female legislators. The males introduced an average of just under five bills (4.7), while the females introduced an average of just over eight bills (8.3).

With regard to social legislation, there were 102 public bills introduced by female legislators which were identified as social legislation and 41 public bills introduced by male legislators identified as social legislation. For female legislators, 64 percent of the public bills they introduced were identified as social legislation. The male legislators in the study introduced public bills of which 37 percent were identified as being social legislation. (See Table 1).

TABLE 1  
NUMBER AND PERCENTAGES OF BILLS INTRODUCED BY LEGISLATORS  
IN THE STUDY BY SEX

Group	Public Bills	Percent of Public Bills Social Legislation
Female	159	64%
Male	111	37%
Total	270	101%

#### Discussion, Implications and Recommendations

The results clearly suggest that the women in the N. C. House were significantly more active in introducing social legislation (bills) than their male colleagues.

Further comparison of the female and male legislators studied as to their tenure, committee assignments, committee chairpersonships and vice-

chairpersonships and overall effectiveness revealed nothing to contraindicate the significance of gender as a key factor in their introduction of bills labeled "social legislation."<sup>8</sup> (See Table 2)

TABLE 2

	Average Overall Effectiveness Rating	Average Number Terms Served In N.C. House	Number of Times Represented on Committees	Number of Chair and Vice- Chairpersonships
Female Legislators	54	2.9	17	23
Male Legislators	56	3.4	22	24

While the male legislators lead in every category, the gaps are relatively narrow and in no case approach the disparity in the number of social legislative bills introduced by the two groups. This contradicts some reported evidence that women are not distinct from men in their policy preferences, simply on the basis of sex.<sup>9</sup> The results of the study are in line with other research suggesting that women are more responsive to policy issues with "moral overtones."<sup>10</sup>

More research is needed in regard to the contributions of women legislators, but it must be designed to investigate areas other than those conventionally considered women's issues. Do female and male legislators differ in specific policy issues in areas such as health, consumer protection, banking or agriculture? The study of expertise among male and female local representatives in Connecticut implies that perhaps they might.<sup>11</sup> Does the interest of female legislators in social legislation, as indicated by the present study, remain constant or alter with increased experience and tenure? Finally, a most compelling need is for investigation of the success rates between female and male legislators as determined, not by the introduction of bills as was investigated in this study, but by the frequency with which the bills they introduce become law.

#### Notes and References

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