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# Welfare Reform in the States: Does the Percentage of Female Legislators in State Legislatures Affect Welfare Reform Policies?

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*My research tests the proposal that female legislators have issue-specific political agendas and that female representation may affect these issues. Welfare is an issue that affects women and children to a larger degree than it does men. To test this hypothesis I use three measures of welfare sanctions and one measure of overall welfare environment as dependent variables. Results indicate that the level of female legislators does not have the expected impact on two of the three sanction policies, but it does have the expected impact on the overall welfare environment.*

There is much debate surrounding the issue of women and politics. This debate has led to several pertinent questions concerning gender and policy. Do women legislators have different political agendas from their male counterparts (Wolbrecht, 2002)? Are there issues that are specifically “female” in nature; such as, welfare reform, health care, child care, abortion, etc. (Carroll, 2002)? Does female representation have a descriptive or substantive effect on the political process (Bratton & Ray, 2002; Carroll, 2002)? Do female legislators view policy issues differently from male legislators (Kathlene, 1995)? Do elected female officials affect policy outcomes (Swers, 2002)? While all of these questions address important research concerns, the last question is the focus of my research.

My research tests the proposal that female legislators have issue-specific political agendas that differ somewhat from those of their male counterparts. This is not to say that male legislators do not agree with female legislators on particular

issues and vice-versa; party identification, constituent concerns, etc. can and do influence elected officials' issue stances. However, female legislators may bring different perspectives and concerns to certain issues. For instance, welfare is an issue that affects women and children to a larger degree than it does men. As such, welfare reform, which encompasses issues like health care and child care for low-income women and children, may be of particular interest to female legislators.

If the premise that female legislators have specific political agendas that differ somewhat from those of their male counterparts is accepted, a logical question follows: Do female legislators affect legislative outcomes? Specifically, does the proportion of female legislators in state legislatures affect welfare policies?

### Welfare Reform

In 1996 the Republican Congress passed, and President Clinton signed into law, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). PRWORA ended the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program and replaced it with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Two major, and controversial, components of TANF that distinguish it from the previous AFDC program are: first, recipients were life limited to 60 cumulative months of receiving benefits and, second, work requirements for continued assistance were established. Single parents must work at least 20 hours per week the first year, increasing to at least 30 hours per week by fiscal year 2000. Two-parent families must work 35 hours per week by July 1, 1997. Further, TANF granted states the autonomy to "experiment" with welfare reform by allowing states the option of instituting additional, even harsher, sanctions on welfare recipients.

Examples of options available to states under TANF are: reducing the lifetime limit of 60 months' assistance that welfare recipients can collect benefits to fewer months, shortening the work requirement time limit, and instituting "family caps" on recipients which place limits on the number of additional children for which recipients can receive additional benefits. In addition to the new and creative sanctions introduced in TANF, it provides for performance bonuses to states that are successful

in reducing welfare rolls by moving welfare recipients from welfare and into the workforce. This provision worried many that there would be a “race to the bottom” of benefits offered among states, the theory being that welfare recipients would leave states with harsher sanctions and take up residency in states with milder sanctions, which, in turn, would cause these states to adopt harsher sanctions in an attempt to reduce welfare rolls and further migration. Research on whether welfare recipients actually migrate to “easier” states is mixed (Berry, Fording, & Hanson, 2003; Peterson & Rom, 1989), but the concept exists and may influence decisions made on welfare reform by state legislatures. For example, Vartanian, Soss, Schram, and Baumohl (1999) find marginal support for male welfare recipients moving to obtain better welfare benefits. They conclude that factors other than welfare benefits impact where people choose to live. In addition, individuals dependent upon welfare do not have funds needed for frequent moves.

Whether states adopt sanctions on welfare recipients is the focus of my paper—specifically whether states adopt work requirement sanctions, family cap sanctions, and lifetime TANF limits of less than 60 months. The overall state welfare “environment” will be analyzed as well. Research on TANF welfare reform points to several factors that may influence state decisions on welfare sanction policies. These include: legislature party makeup; state poverty rates; state total taxable resources (TTR); state per-capita income; state unemployment rate; and percent state minority populations, to name a few. Of interest here is how and if the percentage of female legislators in a state legislature influences welfare sanction policy. My research hypothesis is: as the percentage of female legislators in a state legislature increases, the state legislature will be less likely to adopt sanction policies on welfare recipients and more likely to create a “friendlier” welfare environment.

## Data and Methods

Four dependent variables have been operationalized for analyses. These dependent variables represent specific policy outcomes (welfare policy was adopted) and measures

of overall policy environments (type of welfare environment created by adopted policies).

The first three dependent variables were identified by Soss, Schram, Vartanian, and O'Brien (2001) as indicators of "tough" welfare sanctions; these are dichotomous variables that will be used in logit regressions. Logit regressions allow for an analysis of how each of the independent variables affects the probability of an event occurring, in this case, the probability of sanction policies being adopted. The first dependent variable scored states depending on whether they adopted harsher work time limit policies than required by TANF. The "Work Time Limit" variable was coded *zero* if the state allows a maximum of 24 months before an able-bodied recipient must find employment and *one* if the work time limit is shorter.

The second dependent variable scored states depending on whether they adopted a family cap policy. States adopting a family cap provide either no increase in TANF benefits or reduced benefits to women who have additional children while on welfare. The "Family Cap" variable was coded *zero* if the state did not adopt a family cap and *one* if it did.

The third dependent variable scored states depending on whether they adopted harsher lifetime limit policies than required by TANF. The "Lifetime Limit" variable was coded *zero* if the limit is 60 months and *one* if it is less than 60 months. In these three dummy variables, zeros represent national TANF standards and ones represent harsher, state-imposed sanctions. Therefore, positive coefficients in the logit regressions represent increased probability of sanction adoption.

The final dependent variable represents welfare environments created by overall policy adoption. This variable is ordinal in nature. As such, ordinal logit regressions will be utilized in the subsequent analysis. This variable, "Welfare Reform Score," was developed by Meyers, Gornick, and Peck (2002) and is based on their analysis of cash assistance, food assistance, disability assistance, tax policy, and unemployment compensation in each state. They identified states in terms of *adequacy*: the generosity of benefits received by welfare recipients; *inclusion*: the extent to which benefits reach those in need; and state *policy commitment*: a measure that includes policy choices that shape the availability, accessibility, extensiveness,

or quality of family assistance programs. States were then grouped into one of five categories—minimal, limited, conservative, generous, and integrated—depending on their performance on the above mentioned issues (Meyers et al., 2002). States are coded from a low of *one* (minimal) to a high of *five* (integrated). Given this coding, states that rank higher on this variable are considered more progressive on welfare policy. Summary statistics for dependent variables are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary Statistics (N = 50)

Dependent Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Work Time Limit	0.48	0.50	0	1
Family Cap	0.44	0.50	0	1
Lifetime Limit	0.16	0.37	0	1
Welfare Reform Score	2.98	1.33	1	5

The independent variables included in the logit regressions are often cited as predictors of policy outcomes in welfare policy research. Table 2 provides summary statistics for independent variables.

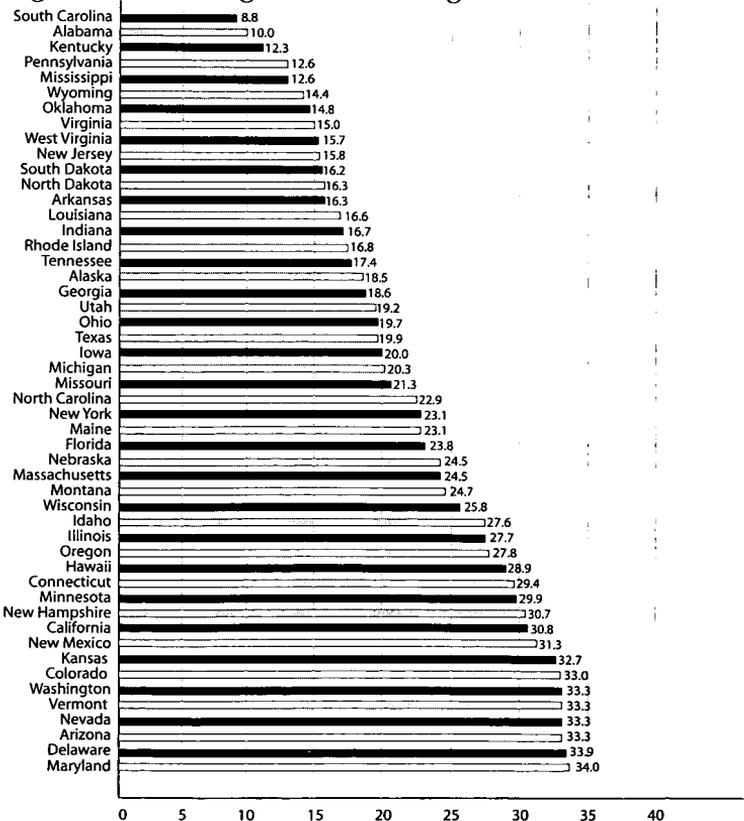
Table 2: Summary Statistics (N = 50)

Independent Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Percent Female Legislators	22.58	7.33	8.8	34
Poverty Rate	12.09	3.01	5.6	20.1
Unemployment Rate	4.87	1.06	2.7	7.8
Percent Black	10.33	9.69	3.7	36.8
TTR Per Capita Index	98.12	18.71	66.9	162.3
Percent Democrat Legislators	52.92	14.76	23.6	86.6
Individualistic	0.34	0.48	0	1
Traditionalistic	0.32	0.47	0	1

The independent variables used are: Percent Female Legislators 2005, Poverty Rate 2005, Unemployment Rate 2005, Percent Black 2005, Total Taxable Resources (TTR) Per Capita Index 2005, Percent Democrat Legislators 2005, Individualistic

Political Culture, and Traditionalistic Political Culture. The independent variable of interest in my analyses is the percentage of female legislators in each state legislature for the year 2005 (Percent Female Legislators: 2005). Values for this variable were acquired from the Women's Legislative Network of National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). Figure 1 reports the percentage of female legislators in each state legislature. As indicated earlier, I predict that states with higher percentages of female legislators will be less likely to adopt welfare sanctions than will states with lower percentages of female legislators. In other words, as the percentage of female legislators increases, the probability of welfare sanctions being adopted will decrease and welfare policy environments will improve; these coefficients are hypothesized to be positive in the three logit regressions and positive in the ordinal logit regression as well.

Figure 1. Percentage of Female Legislators



The next three independent variables in the model specifications are intended to measure population parameter influences on welfare sanction policies and overall welfare policy environments. These include "Poverty Rate: 2005," "Unemployment Rate: 2005," and "Percent Black: 2005." Values for these variables were provided by the U.S. Census. I predict that states with higher poverty rates will be more likely to adopt welfare sanctions and the welfare policy environment will decline. This need not be seen as punishment but, instead, as a means of getting the unemployed employed—research has shown that poverty rates decline as unemployment rates decline (Blank, 1997, 2002; Hoynes & MaCurdy, 1994).

Much of the same logic behind poverty rate influence on welfare policies is found in unemployment rate influence on welfare policies. In an attempt to move welfare recipients back into the workforce, I predict that states with higher unemployment rates will be more likely to adopt welfare sanctions and the welfare policy environment will decline.

Finally, Fording (2003) argues that there is a racial component to welfare reform. Given Fording's argument, I predict that states with higher percentages of Blacks will be more likely to adopt welfare sanctions and the welfare policy environment will decline.

Next I added a measure of state economies. As would be expected, there is a wealth of literature pertaining to state economics and levels of welfare support/reform (Blank, 1997; Garfinkel, Rainwater, & Smeeding, 2004; Moller, Huber, Stephens, Bradley, & Nielsen, 2003; Rainwater & Smeeding, 2003). While there are several state economic variables that could be included in these models, economic measures, when grouped in one model, generally suffer from high degrees of multicollinearity. To avoid this problem, I settled on one measure of state economics—"Total Taxable Resources Per Capita Index: 2005." TTR is a detailed measure of state fiscal capacities comprised of several state economic indicators (e.g., gross state product, federal indirect business taxes, dividend incomes, net realized capital gains, etc.). Values for TTR were collected from the Department of Commerce. Because states with higher TTR are better able to fund welfare programs (Tannenwald, 1999), I hypothesize that states with higher TTR values will be less likely to adopt welfare sanctions and welfare policy environments will improve.

Next I included a measure representing the percentage of Democrats in each state legislature. Here again there is a wealth of literature pertaining to party balance and levels of welfare support/reform (Brown, 1995; Fellowes & Rowe, 2004; Hero & Preuhs, 2007; Holbrook & Van Dunk, 1993; Keiser, Mueser, & Choi, 2004; Smith, 1997). Where party balance and welfare support/reform is concerned, the consensus of research finds that Democrats are more supportive of welfare policies. This variable, "Percent Democrat Legislators: 2005," is simply the percentage of each legislature comprised of Democrats. Values for this variable were collected from the NCSL. Because Democrats are generally perceived to be more favorable to the plight of the poor, I predict that states with higher percentages of Democratic legislators will be less likely to adopt welfare sanctions and welfare policy environments will improve.

Last, I include an independent variable that taps measures of state political culture. "State Political Culture" utilizes Elazar's (1970) state political culture classifications of moralistic, individualistic, or traditionalistic. States with a moralistic political culture view the overall society as more important than the individual; states with an individualistic political culture limit community/government intervention into private activities; and states with a traditionalistic political culture limit government to securing the existing social order. Obviously, some states encompass aspects of more than one political culture. For my research, states are classified by the dominant political culture as identified by Elazar. Because multinomial variables cannot be used as independent variables in regression analysis, two dummy variables were created with moralistic state political cultures as the reference category (coded as *zero* in both variables) and individualist and traditionalistic political cultures were coded as *one* in alternate variables. Given this coding, I predict that states with individualistic and traditionalistic political cultures will be more likely to adopt welfare sanctions and welfare policy environments will decline.

## Results

The logit regressions on the dichotomous dependent policy sanction variables produced interesting, albeit somewhat

tempered, results. As can be seen in Table 3, several of the coefficients are in the predicted directions, with some notable exceptions. When interpreting logit coefficients it is important to remember how the dependent variables were coded—zero represents sanction policy not being adopted; positive coefficients indicate that sanction policies are more likely to be adopted.

Foremost among the notable exceptions is the percent female legislators coefficient for the family cap and lifetime limit sanctions; they are positive instead of the predicted negative. This indicates that increasing levels of female legislators increases the probability of stiffer family cap and lifetime limit sanctions. These results could indicate that female legislators do not want to reward reckless behavior (having more children while on welfare) and that 60 months is too long a period for individuals to receive welfare benefits. Where work time limits are concerned, the coefficient for level of female legislators is negative as expected. This finding is intuitive, as female legislators may better understand the difficulties of working mothers. Equally surprising, poverty rate is negative in the family cap and lifetime limit models, meaning that as poverty rates increase, harsher sanctions are less likely. This may indicate that states react to the needs of citizens instead of welfare politics. Unemployment rates produced interesting results for two of three sanction policies as well. However, it is in the predicted direction for work time limits, which is the only sanction policy of the three directly related to getting welfare recipients back to work. Family caps and lifetime limits may be seen as punishments unrelated to unemployment levels and therefore may not be affected by unemployment rates.

Percent Black was in the predicted direction across all three sanction policies and, in the family cap model, the coefficient was significant (at the .05 level). These results indicate that levels of state Black populations are good predictors of sanction policies, especially where family caps are concerned. Further, that the family cap coefficient was significant for percent Black may reflect a racial component to welfare policy.

TTR levels were as predicted in two of three models (work time and lifetime limits). The negative work and lifetime limit coefficients may reflect an ability to fund TANF for the entire

24 and 60 months and the positive family cap coefficients may reflect an unwillingness to sanction certain behaviors, regardless of revenue. Finally, the percent Democratic legislators coefficients were in the predicted direction in two of the three specifications—family cap and lifetime limits. That the work time limit coefficient was positive is interesting and may reflect that Democratic legislators do not want to be seen as sanctioning a policy that rewards welfare recipients for not taking steps to move from welfare to work.

Table 3: Logit Models of Welfare Sanction Policies

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables		
	Work Time Limit	Family Cap	Lifetime Limit
Percent Female Legislators	-0.025 (0.058)	0.046 (0.061)	0.058 (0.072)
Percent Democrat Legislators	0.005 (0.024)	-0.042 (0.025)	-0.058 (0.035)
TTR Per Capita Index	-0.023 (0.023)	0.010 (0.028)	-0.005 (0.031)
Unemployment Rate	0.095 (0.378)	-0.197 (0.415)	-0.212 (0.602)
Percent Black	0.034 (0.046)	0.121* (0.056)	0.069 (0.063)
Poverty Rate	0.118 (0.201)	-0.336 (0.218)	-0.251 (0.264)
Individualistic	2.311* (1.102)	0.868 (1.042)	0.546 (1.368)
Traditionalistic	11.098 (1.266)	2.221 (1.452)	1.227 (1.771)
Constant	-0.193 (3.947)	2.683 (4.043)	3.025 (4.742)
Pseudo r <sup>2</sup>	0.19	0.24	0.17
Log Likelihood	-27.98	-25.95	-18.35
N	50	50	50

Note: standard errors in parenthesis. \*p < .05

The state political culture variables produced predicted results. Both coefficients were positive and the individualistic coefficient in the work time limit model was significant (at the .05 level). Given that individualist state political cultures place the needs of the individual over those of the society, this result is not surprising.

Next I calculated predicted probabilities of sanction policies being adopted depending on the percentage of female legislators in state legislatures (Spoust, developed by Long and Freese, was used to generate predicted probabilities). To do so, I varied the percentage of female legislators from its minimum value (8.8) to its maximum value (34), while holding all other variables at their mean value. The difference between the minimum and maximum value (subtracting the minimum value from the maximum value) is representative of the “change” in probability of sanctions being adopted. Positive change indicates an increased probability of sanctions being adopted, while negative change indicates a decreased probability of sanctions being adopted.

Table 4: Predicted Probabilities of Welfare Sanction Policies

	Min	Max	Change
Work Time Limit Sanction*	42%	57%	15%
Family Cap Sanction*	57%	29%	-28%
Lifetime Limit Sanction	20%	6%	-14%

Note: \*p < .05

The predicted probabilities displayed in Table 4 shed light on the affect of percent of female legislators on the probability of sanction policies being adopted. Two sanction policy performed as hypothesized—family cap and lifetime limit. Where the family cap and lifetime limit policies are concerned, varying the percent female legislator variable from its minimum to its maximum value generated predicted negative probabilities. Predicted probabilities for family cap sanctions indicate a 28 percent decreased probability of family cap sanctions being adopted as the percent of female legislators increases; this difference is statistically significant (at the .05 level). Predicted probabilities for lifetime limit sanctions indicate a 14 percent decreased probability of lifetime limit sanctions being adopted

as the percent of female state legislators increases. Where work time limits are concerned, when the number of female state legislators is at its minimum value, there is a 42 percent predicted probability of work time limit sanctions being adopted. Conversely, when female state legislators is at its maximum value, there is a 57 percent predicted probability of work time limit sanctions being adopted. More directly, varying the percentage of female state legislators from its minimum (8.8) to its maximum (34) value results in a 15 percent increase in the probability that work time limit sanctions will not be adopted, and the difference is significant (at the .05 level).

I next ran an ordinal logit regression on the welfare reform score dependent variable (see Table 5). When interpreting the coefficients in Table 5 it is important to remember how the dependent variable was coded. The dependent variable was coded from *one* to *five* with *one* representing minimal welfare policies and *five* representing integrated welfare policies; *two* represents limited welfare policies, *three* represents conservative welfare policies, and *four* represents generous welfare policies. Given this coding, the percent female legislators is in the predicted direction. Additionally, percent Democratic legislators, poverty rate, individualistic and traditionalistic state political cultures are all in the predicted direction. Unemployment rate was predicted to be negative but is positive and TTR was predicted to be positive but is negative. Most surprising is that percent Black, which was predicted to be negative, was positive.

These results indicate that the percentage of female legislators does have a positive effect on the overall welfare environments in states. While one of the individual sanction policies (work time limit) presented in the logit models did not yield predicted results, the percent female legislators in a given state may play a more important role in the formulation of overall welfare policy, which then creates a friendlier welfare environment.

Predicted probabilities were run on the welfare reform score dependent variable as well. Here again, percent female legislators was varied from its minimum to its maximum values while holding all other variables at their mean values. This process created five predicted probabilities for the welfare reform score dependent variable. Each set of predicted

probabilities provides percentages for each category within the ordinal dependent variables.

Table 5: Ordinal Logit Welfare Reform Score Model

	$\beta$	S.E.	Sig
Percent Female Legislators	0.048	0.048	0.33
Percent Democrat Legislators	0.037	0.021	0.08
TTR Per Capita Index	-0.005	0.025	0.81
Unemployment Rate	0.178	0.335	0.59
Percent Black	0.031	0.043	0.46
Poverty Rate	-0.429	0.179	0.02
Individualistic	-1.049	0.901	0.24
Traditionalistic	-19.624	1445.976	0.98
Cut Point 1	-22.055	1445.981	--
Cut Point 2	-4.435	3.478	--
Cut Point 3	-2.114	3.469	--
Cut Point 4	-0.213	3.506	--
Pseudo $r^2 = 0.41$			
Log Likelihood = -46.94			
N = 50			

Predicted probabilities for welfare reform showed minimal changes in all five categories. While the predicted probability changes were minimal, they were in the expected direction. Changes for the minimal and limited categories were negative, while changes in the conservative, generous, and integrated categories were positive. These changes indicate that as the percentage of female legislators increased, so did the probability of a state having an overall friendlier welfare environment.

## Conclusion

My research findings are in line with the literature regarding the effect of female legislators on policy outcomes, which is to say "it depends" or "sometimes." More specifically, the effectiveness of female legislators in state legislatures is tempered or enhanced by other factors. Do female legislators, a minority in every state, go along for the sake of getting along? Meaning,

do female legislators, upon entering the “good ol’ boy” world of politics, consciously or subconsciously decide not to rock the political boat by not addressing issues of concern to them or by adopting more male-oriented policy issues? This is more likely to occur in legislatures with small minorities of female legislators. When the numbers of female legislators increase, there can be a “tipping” effect whereby they are emboldened by their numbers and become more effective at addressing issues that concern them.

There are, of course, institutional factors that affect whether females are elected as legislators and, once elected, that affect female legislator effectiveness as well. Nominating/primary processes can favor male candidates and leadership positions can be difficult for females to secure.

Where specifics are concerned, one possible explanation for the counterintuitive results regarding percent female state legislators on work time limit sanctions may be found in the state political culture; that is, state political culture may be the driving force behind policies adopted in individual states. This argument implies that elected officials act in accordance with the political culture of their states regardless of their gender or party affiliation. Compare, for example, Democrats in Texas with Democrats in Massachusetts. Texas Democrats are likely to be more conservative than Massachusetts Democrats. These characteristics are likely to transcend gender. Therefore, even if it is assumed that female Democrats in Texas are more liberal on certain issues than are male Democrats in Texas, they are not likely to be as liberal on these issues as are female Democrats in Massachusetts. If these assumptions are accepted, then sanction policy outcomes in particular states, regardless of the percent of female legislators, are the product of the state political culture. Of course, other factors (party composition, TTR, race, poverty, etc.) can and do influence policy outcomes, but these factors may, in part, be the product of state political cultures as well.<sup>1</sup>

One last point is worth restating. The model presented in Table 5 performed quite well yielding hypothesized directions on all but three variables. This model utilized the Meyers et al. (2002) measure of welfare reform, which is a cumulative policy variable. As previously stated, these results indicate that the percent female legislators can have a positive effect on the overall welfare environments. This implies that percent female

legislators does matter on a realm of policies (cash assistance, food assistance, disability assistance, tax policy, and unemployment compensation in each state), the cumulative effect of which is better or worse welfare environments. Therefore, even if the level of female legislators does not result in predicted policy outcomes on one of the three sanction policies (work time limits), it does appear to matter on welfare environments. In the end, these policies may matter more to welfare recipients than whether specific sanctions are adopted.

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#### Endnotes:

1. The logit and ordered logit models presented were run without measures of state political culture included and the results were strikingly different. Most notable, the coefficient signs for percent female and black legislators were opposite of the directions for the models that included these measures. This is evidence of the affect that political culture plays in the policy adoption in state legislatures.