



Critical Actors in Subnational Legislatures: A new frontier in women's representation?



OKLAHOMA STATE
UNIVERSITY

Pritzlaff¹, Riley

1. Oklahoma State University – Main Campus, Dept. of Political Science, Stillwater, OK

Abstract

This study examines women's issues and critical actors in Republican-controlled and Democrat-controlled U.S. state legislatures by examining publicly available legislative data. I study individual authors as potential critical actors. Existing work in comparative politics finds that men are more likely to advocate for women's issues as women's presence increases, though there is less consensus regarding subnational critical actors. I contribute to this gap using 2020 legislative data from Oklahoma and Maryland. Oklahoma and Maryland are different in two key regards: Oklahoma's legislature was made up of approximately 21.5% women as of 2020 and continues to be controlled by a Republican supermajority in both legislative chambers (as well as a Republican trifecta). Maryland, on the other hand, was made up of 38.8% women as of 2020 and was controlled by Democratic supermajorities in both legislative chambers (though Republicans controlled the governorship). Legislative data is gathered with Legiscan and analyzed using binary logistic regression. I propose two main hypotheses: H1: Women are more likely to introduce women's issue legislation, but successful legislation is more likely to have a male author both in Oklahoma and Maryland. H2: Women's issue bills are more likely to be authored by Democrats overall, but partisan patterns in success will arise in single-state analysis. I find that bill success largely depends on author party for the 2020 legislative session.

Literature Review and Theoretical Background:

Representation and legislative behavior

- Women made up 21.5% of the Oklahoma Legislature and 38.8% of Maryland Legislature in 2020 (National Conference of State Legislatures 2020).
- In German subnational legislatures, men tended to speak on women's issues during debate more as women's presence increased (Kroeber 2022). This leads me to believe that men may be more likely to introduce women's issue bills in Maryland, given the higher proportion of women in the legislature.
- Women's issues tend to be most closely associated with the Democratic party, so I anticipate that women's issue bills are more likely to have Democrat authors (Swers 2016).

Legislative success

- Because legislators may be more likely to coauthor bills if they share the same race, gender, and ethnicity as the principal author, I hypothesize that women's issue bills are more likely to have women coauthors (Bratton and Rouse 2011). As such, I argue that women are likely to be critical actors.

Women's Issues

- The literature is divided on a definition for women's issues. For example, some argue for a more flexible model that lets women authors define what women's issues are by nature of what they are writing (Volden, Wiseman, and Wittmer 2018). Others choose a more stringent model that defines women's issues as those that almost exclusively affect women and NOT men (Gerrity, Osborn, and Mendez 2007).

Methodology and Research Design

- Data originally sourced from Legiscan (<https://legiscan.com/>) for the 2020 legislative session (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) and altered by the author as needed.
- Dependent variables: Bill issue and success (binary variables where 0 = non-women's issue/unsuccessful bill and 1 = women's issue bill/successful bill)
- Independent variables: Gender of author (0 = man, 1 = woman) and number of coauthors (continuous variable)
- I use logistic regression to analyze both dependent variables.
- I define women's issues as those that exclusively/disproportionately affect women and NOT men (Gerrity, Osborn, and Mendez 2007).

References:

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 Kroeber, Corinna. 2022. "When Do Men MPs Claim to Represent Women in Plenary Debates—Time-Series Cross-Sectional Evidence from the German States." *Political Research Quarterly*. doi:10.1177/10659129221119199.
 National Conference of State Legislatures. 2020. "Women in State Legislatures for 2020." Last modified January 7, 2020. <https://www.ncsl.org/womens-legislative-network/women-in-state-legislatures-for-2020>.
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 Volden, Craig, Alan E. Wiseman, and Dana E. Wittmer. 2018. "Women's Issues and their Fates in the US Congress." *Political Science Research and Methods* 6 (4):679-696. doi: 10.1017/psrm.2016.32.

Hypotheses

- H1: Women are more likely to introduce women's issue legislation, but successful legislation is more likely to have a male author both in Oklahoma and Maryland.
- H2: Women's issue bills are more likely to be authored by Democrats overall, but partisan patterns in success will arise in single-state analysis (see Swers 2016).
- H3: I expect that bill success will be predicted by both the gender and party of the authors. I hypothesize that men are more likely to author successful legislation in both states.

VARIABLES	Combined Success	OK Success	MD Success
Bill issue	0.306 (0.205)	0.390 (0.343)	0.151 (0.282)
Author gender	-0.147 (0.109)	-0.297 (0.195)	-0.0364 (0.137)
Author party	0.877*** (0.107)	0.776*** (0.293)	-0.199 (0.171)
Coauthors	0.00579 (0.00397)	0.0343*** (0.00940)	-0.00178 (0.00647)
Women coauthors	-0.284* (0.156)	0.0515 (0.209)	-0.329 (0.245)
Leadership	0.401*** (0.147)	0.0631 (0.190)	0.129 (0.275)
Co. leadership	0.321** (0.151)	-0.226 (0.349)	0.373** (0.178)
Constant	-1.227*** (0.115)	-0.826*** (0.301)	-1.198*** (0.154)
Observations	2,378	908	1,470

Standard errors in parentheses
 *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

VARIABLES	Combined Bill issue	OK Bill issue	MD Bill issue
Author gender	0.933*** (0.209)	0.861** (0.373)	0.884*** (0.260)
Author party	-0.0208 (0.230)	-1.614*** (0.424)	0.0438 (0.337)
Coauthors	0.00966 (0.00643)	0.00507 (0.00944)	0.0188* (0.0101)
Women coauthors	0.932*** (0.317)	1.500*** (0.416)	-0.0766 (0.488)
Leadership	0.217 (0.307)	0.825** (0.399)	-1.096 (0.743)
Co. leadership	0.485* (0.264)	0.755 (0.587)	0.427 (0.311)
Bill success	0.295 (0.207)	0.408 (0.353)	0.146 (0.283)
Constant	-4.011*** (0.265)	-2.884*** (0.479)	-3.667*** (0.334)
Observations	2,378	908	1,470

Standard errors in parentheses
 *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Quantitative Findings

- I find strong support for H1. Women's issue bills are more likely to be introduced by women (significant at $\alpha = 0.01$ level), though I do not find significant gendered effects on success in neither the state analyses nor the combined analysis.
- For H2, I find that party of the author is only a significant predictor of bill issue in Oklahoma, but in Oklahoma my hypothesis is strongly supported at the $\alpha = 0.01$ level.
- For H3, I only find partial support in Oklahoma and when the cases are combined. A bill in Oklahoma seems more likely to pass if it has a Republican author, an expected finding. Party was a predictor of bill success when the two cases are combined.

Discussion and Limitations:

- The evidence for H1 indicates potential gaps in the literature pertaining to substantive representation. While men may be more likely to speak on women's issues during plenary debate as Kroeber notes (2022), there would appear to be a difference between speaking on women's issues and introducing legislation. Qualitative methods such as process tracing could help shed light on this pattern, but based on this data alone, women rather than men appear to be critical actors.
- Interestingly, I found that the number of coauthors was a predictor of bill success in Oklahoma. I theorize that this finding is intuitive, given that it is unlikely for coauthors of a bill to vote against it. In this scenario, as the number of coauthors increases, so does the number of reliable "yes" votes.
- One significant limitation in this study is the coding methodology. There are several values that are missing not at random (such as coauthor leadership- if there are no coauthors, this variable is necessarily missing). I would propose multiple imputation to solve this issue and include more cases. Given that very little statistically significant findings are noted for Maryland, this method may be necessary to improve the robustness of the model.