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Gender Equity: Illusion or Reality for Women in the Federal Executive Service?

With the passage of the Civil Service Reform Act in 1978, the federal government created the Senior Executive Service (SES) and formally committed the federal government to equal employment opportunity, advocating a “federal service reflective of the nation’s diversity.” Since then, women have made dramatic progress in the ranks of the SES. This research probes the following questions: Has women’s advancement into the ranks of the SES been illusory or real? Are women simply being appointed to token positions to fulfill affirmative action goals? Or do they contribute to governance from real positions of power and influence? Using data from a recent survey of Senior Executive Service members, this research indicates that male and female members of the SES have almost identical responsibilities and, most interestingly, women executives rate themselves as relatively more influential than do their male colleagues.

In 1978, women constituted 4 percent of the members of Congress, 10 percent of the nation’s state legislators, and 5 percent of top federal executives (CAWP 2000a; CAWP 2000b; OPM 2000). In the same year, the Civil Service Reform Act was enacted. This legislation was expected, in part, to simultaneously check prevailing trends toward increased political patronage and improve federal management and governance (Huddleston and Boyer 1996; Ingraham 1995). Responding to merit abuses under the Nixon administration, the newly created Merit Systems Protection Board was put in place to monitor and safeguard merit procedures throughout the federal service. Equal employment opportunity was explicitly supported in the law, as the statute declared for the first time that “it is the policy of the United States . . . to provide . . . a federal work force reflective of the Nation’s diversity” (PL 95-454, section 3, 2301 (b)(1)). To these ends, a Federal Equal Opportunity Recruitment Program was created to address the underrepresentation of women and minorities in the federal service (Ingraham 1995; Naff 1998; Rosenbloom and Berry 1984).

The Senior Executive Service (SES), an elite corps of the nation’s top-level federal managers, was also created as part of the Civil Service Reform Act. Proponents of the SES argued it would give the president greater control over the massive federal bureaucracy, as well as reward the nation’s premiere administrators with merit bo-

nuses and greater mobility. According to a report by the Federal Personnel Management Project, a task force established by President Carter to study and propose changes to the existing civil service system, the SES would allow greater opportunities for career executives, both male and female, to contribute their talents and expertise to federal governance (Huddleston and Boyer 1996). The members of the SES could be moved from agency to agency, providing leadership and management expertise across the entire federal government. Rank was placed in the person, not the position, both to ensure that SES members possessed a similar cache of skills and abilities and to facilitate moving them across positions and agencies (Huddleston 1987; Huddleston and Boyer 1996; Michaels 1997; MSPB 1990).¹ Further, merit bonuses were instituted to reward the best and brightest among the nation’s premiere public administrators.

A host of research shows that executive-level women benefited greatly from the equal employment opportunity provisions of the Civil Service Reform Act (Kellough 1989;

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Kellough and Rosenbloom 1992; Lewis 1988). The gains have been most remarkable within the ranks of the SES, as almost a quarter of these positions are now held by women (OPM 2000). However, one of the complaints often lodged against affirmative action and equal employment opportunity programs of all types is that they place women and minorities into positions they are not qualified for, to satisfy political demands for a diverse workforce. The dramatic gains made by women in federal executive positions over the past 20 years raises the following question: Has numerical growth in the federal executive service been accompanied by real gains in the job status, power, and influence of these women? Or are women being placed in positions with relatively little discretion and opportunity? True equity in the federal executive service would be evident if gender played no role in determining the shape and nature of one's job. On the other hand, if women are simply being appointed to token positions with little responsibility and cache, their advancement may be more illusion than reality. This article empirically assesses the extent to which male and female members of the SES share comparable roles and responsibilities and are afforded similar opportunities to influence governmental decision making.

Gender and Bureaucracy

Scholars of representative bureaucracy argue the demographic composition of the public sector affects the nature and substance of governmental outputs (Krislov and Rosenbloom 1981; Kranz 1976; Meier 1975; Thompson 1976). A diverse public sector is important not only for symbolic reasons, but because governmental decisions are expected to be more responsive to the public when the workforce "looks like America." As the reasoning goes, individuals from different social backgrounds bring different attitudes, priorities, and perspectives to their jobs. With a diverse public-sector workforce, "the wide range of concerns generally voiced in a highly pluralistic nation is more likely to be heard ... than in one drawn disproportionately from a single social group" (Shafritz et al. 1992, 230).

But not all administrators are equally likely to influence policy in ways that bestow rewards upon their own social groups. A central tenet of representative bureaucracy theory is that in order for a passively representative bureaucracy to produce broadly representative policy outputs, administrators must have sufficient discretion to influence government decisions (Meier 1993b; Thompson 1976). Thus, if women or people of color in administrative positions exercise relatively less influence and discretion in their jobs than do white men, they will not be able to affect policy outcomes to the same degree, and so the amount of active representation for women and minorities will be less-

ened. As Naff (2001) demonstrates, subtle biases often constrain the advancement opportunities for women and people of color, leaving them in positions that afford less discretion.

The Civil Service Reform Act dictates that all Senior Executive Service members demonstrate the same core competencies, so we should expect male and female executives to be relatively indistinguishable from one another. Mani (1997) finds preliminary support for such expectations, showing very similar educational backgrounds and leadership styles among male and female federal senior executives. However, the bulk of evidence from other political arenas suggests that women have less significant responsibilities and fewer opportunities to influence policy making. Women and minorities have generally been well represented at the lower levels of the public service, but underrepresented in the highest ranks, where policy-making opportunities are more prevalent (Kellough 1990; Kranz 1976; Lewis 1994; McGlen and Sarkees 1993; Meier 1975; Meier and Nigro 1976; Naff 2001; Nachmias and Rosenbloom 1973; Stewart 1976).

Feminist scholars argue further that bureaucracy, a masculine institution, mitigates against gender-neutral bureaucratic roles and responsibilities (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995; Newman 1995; King 1995; Stivers 1993). When women do advance to managerial and higher-level positions, they often find themselves in stereotypically feminine areas (education, health, social services) and in less powerful positions than their male colleagues (Guy and Duerst-Lahti 1992), leaving them with fewer opportunities to shape government decisions. Building on Lowi's (1964, 1985) widely discussed policy typology, which links bureaucratic power with organizational mission, Meredith Newman and Rita Mae Kelly (Kelly and Newman 2001; Newman 1994, 1995) find evidence that gender conditions bureaucratic power. According to Lowi, where one is employed within the government affects one's access to power. Ripley and Franklin (1991) add to his work, arguing that distributive policies afford bureaucrats considerable involvement in policy making while redistributive policies afford substantially less. In state and municipal bureaucracies, the majority of women are employed in redistributive agencies while the greatest numbers of men work in distributive areas (Newman 1994, 1995; Kelly and Newman 2001; Miller, Kerr, and Reid 1999). Thus, women often find themselves at a competitive disadvantage because they are employed primarily in the types of agencies that afford them the least discretion.

Much additional research confirms that comparable positions in the public sector do not necessarily lead to equal power and responsibility, especially when gender intervenes. Elected to the U.S. Congress in 1974, former Representative Patricia Schroeder explains how she and

Ron Dellums, an African American colleague, were forced to share one chair during committee meetings of the Armed Services Committee because committee chairman F. Edward Hebert believed “that women and blacks were worth only half of one ‘regular’ member” (Schroeder 1998, 41). This story clearly symbolizes that women’s succession into largely male ranks does not guarantee they will be accorded similar respect and influence once they arrive. In state legislatures, Kathlene (1994) finds that gender affects one’s ability to exercise power in committee hearings. Expecting that an individual’s position within the legislature (bill sponsor, committee chair, or committee member) will affect the amount of time a legislator holds the floor in committee hearings, Kathlene analyzes transcripts from 12 committee hearings in the Colorado State Legislature. Position does indeed influence participation in the committee hearings, with bill sponsors speaking most often, committee chairs the next most engaged, and rank-and-file committee members speaking least. In addition, gender figures into the mix. Regardless of position, female legislators speak less often than do male legislators, even controlling for interest in the bill, partisanship, and legislative tenure. Male committee members essentially dominate hearings even when women chair the committees. Turning to the executive branch, empirical evidence shows female civil servants are less likely than their male colleagues to exercise managerial or supervisory authority, even controlling for grade level, education, age, and federal experience (Lewis 1986). Further, female state agency heads have fewer contacts with outside political players than do their male counterparts, suggesting less complex networks from which to draw political support when necessary (Brudney, Hebert, and Wright 2000).

This research explores gender equity at the top of the federal bureaucracy. If female administrators in the SES are placed in disproportionately token positions that afford few real opportunities to shape government decision making, they will have fewer opportunities to make policy decisions that reflect women’s interests, calling into question the efficacy of a representative bureaucracy. On the other hand, if the Civil Service Reform Act has promoted genuine diversity in the SES, men and women should be remarkably similar to one another and equally likely to exercise discretion, satisfying the basic conditions of representative bureaucracy.

Data and Methods

The data for this study come from a mail survey administered to 1,000 SES members in the winter of 1996. After two mailings and follow-up postcards, 570 surveys were received, resulting in a 57 percent response rate. The sample is representative of the entire SES in terms of race, depart-

ment, political or career status, and geographic location. Women were oversampled to ensure sufficient numbers in the sample for analysis. Consequently, the responses were weighted to adjust for the unequal probabilities of selection in the sample.²

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management defines five common executive core qualifications that are necessary for all SES members to effectively perform their jobs: strategic vision, human resources management, program development and evaluation, resources planning and management, and organizational representation and liaison.³ Drawing from the core qualifications, the survey instrument asked respondents to indicate which duties they perform and to rate their own influence in carrying out various responsibilities.

I first investigate whether SES members’ roles and responsibilities vary by gender. If gender equity is an illusion, we should find female executives stuck in token positions, marked by fewer and less discretionary responsibilities. If so, the sexes ultimately may have unequal opportunities to influence federal policy decisions. I also take into account the possibility that responsibilities vary from agency to agency. For example, the organizational liaison qualification requires SES members to “explain, advocate, and negotiate with individuals and groups internally and externally,” including, but not limited to, members of Congress, congressional staff, agency heads, other career and political executives, and interest groups (OPM 1994). As Lowi (1964, 1985) and Ripley and Franklin (1991) suggest, interactions between Congress and the bureaucracy are likely to vary from policy issue to policy issue, with close and cooperative relationships between congressional subcommittees and executive branch officials most common when distributive policy issues are at stake. Further, previous literature suggests that women are often disproportionately concentrated in social service agencies and data from the Office of Personnel Management indicate the largest contingent of SES women is located in the Department of Health and Human Services, which is usually characterized as an arena of redistributive policy (see table 1 for a breakdown of gender and agency type in the SES). As such, if fewer executive women are employed in agencies that deal regularly with distributive policy issues, less contact with members of Congress and congressional staff may simply reflect the nature of bureaucratic and congressional relations. Thus, each agency is categorized as distributive, regulatory, redistributive, or constituent (table 1).

Examining the breakdown of SES members by gender and policy type reveals that senior executive women are distributed very much like senior men, in contrast with the employment patterns described thus far at the state and municipal levels.⁴ While Newman (1994, 1995) finds that

Table 1 Percentage of SES Positions in Different Agency Types, by Gender

Department/agency**	Percentage of women in SES positions		Percentage of men in SES positions	
	Sample (n = 112)*	Population (n = 1,135)	Sample* (n = 449)	Population (n = 5,870)
Distributive policy organizations Agriculture, Energy, NASA, National Endowment for the Arts, National Science Foundation, Small Business Administration, and Transportation	29.5	28.5	32.3	33.4
Redistributive policy organizations Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, Social Security Administration, and Veterans' Administration	24.1	18.8	12.7	10.1
Regulatory policy organizations Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Environmental Protection Agency, Justice, National Labor Relations Board, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Securities and Exchange Commission, and Transportation (ATF, FAA)	22.3	24.8	22.7	22.8
Constituent policy organizations Commerce, Defense, EEOC, General Services Administration, Merit Systems Protection Board, Office of Management and Budget, Office of Personnel Management, State	24.1	27.9	32.3	33.6

Sources: For SES population numbers, OPM (1995); for SES sample numbers, Survey of Senior Executives.
 *Sample numbers reflect weighted cases.
 **The following definitions were used to categorize agencies and departments:
Distributive agencies: Agencies that "are almost the opposite of regulatory agencies. Although like regulatory agencies in being responsible for policies that work directly on or through individuals, the relationship is one of patron and client rather than controller and controlled" (Lowi 1985, 87). According to Meier, the five most common types are government subsidies, support of research, collection and dissemination of information, creation of distributive goods, and the provision of insurance (1993a, 102).
Regulatory agencies: those agencies "responsible for implementing the classic control policies of government, formulating or implementing rules imposing obligations on individuals, and providing punishment for nonconformance." (Lowi 1985, 85).
Redistributive agencies: those who "maintain and manipulate categories of human beings ... [and] discriminate between the money providers and the service demanders, e.g., rich versus poor, young and employed versus old and unemployed, savers versus consumers" (Lowi 1985, 93). Meier further adds that such policies typically "tax one group of people to provide benefits to another group" (Meier 1993a, 94).
Constituent agencies: "The missions of these agencies come closest to maintenance of sovereignty.... There is minimal responsibility for making or implementing rules that pertain directly to citizen conduct or status" (Lowi 1985, 94). Meier (1993a) identifies them as falling into two categories: 1) national security and foreign affairs, and 2) governmental service bureaus (such as GSA, OPM, etc).
 Note: When I was uncertain under which category an organization should be placed, I consulted the very helpful lists of agencies and their policy types published by both Lowi (1985) and Newman (1994, 1995). Used together, I was able to classify each agency or department in the sample accordingly.

the majority of female senior administrators (53 percent) in Florida are concentrated in redistributive agencies, the largest percentage of women in the federal senior ranks work for distributive agencies, as do their male colleagues (30 percent and 32 percent, respectively; see table 1). Higher proportions of federal executive women than men are employed in redistributive policy organizations (24 percent and 13 percent, respectively), consistent with Newman's work (1994, 1995). However, the gap is much smaller in the federal executive service than the gap that Newman reports in Florida (9 percent difference in federal executive, 23 percent difference in Florida). Women and men are similarly represented in regulatory policy organizations, with nearly identical percentages serving in these types of organizations. Finally, slightly greater proportions of men than women work for constituent organizations (33 percent versus 28 percent). All in all, these data suggest women are not necessarily relegated to less discretionary agencies than their male colleagues, but end up distributed in fairly similar fashion.⁵

I also compare male and female perceptions of power and influence by drawing from the battery of questions that inquire about the amount of influence each SES individual wields in performing a variety of tasks. For example, respondents were asked whether they influence policy

making by persuading, cultivating public support, gathering information, or making policy recommendations. By comparing the influence that men and women attribute to each of these types of activities, I am able to assess the ways that individuals think they are able to exercise power and influence. Again, if women are found predominantly in token positions with limited opportunities to exert power, we would expect them to report relatively less perceived influence than their male colleagues.

Findings

Overall, men and women in the SES have virtually identical job responsibilities (table 2). Both men and women in the SES correspond with individuals inside and outside government, contribute to organizational budgetary and personnel matters, and engage in policy and program activities. There is no evidence that women have less responsibility than their male colleagues, as their percentages are slightly higher on all but three of the items (explaining the merits of policies to one's supervisor, keeping abreast of new issues, and choosing among alternatives for achieving policy goals), and these differences are not statistically significant. Further, controlling for the type of agency they work in does not change these findings (table 3). With very

few exceptions, women and men in the SES have more similar than different responsibilities. It appears that women in distributive agencies are slightly less likely to have responsibility for interacting with their supervisors, yet the vast majority of both sexes engage in this activity. These women are also more likely to explain the merits of policies before both the Office of Management and Budget and congressional committees, as approximately 15 percent and 19 percent more women have such responsibilities. On all other measures except one (making budgetary decisions), more women than men indicated they have the particular responsibility.

In regulatory agencies, no statistically significant differences in responsibility separate the sexes. In fact, relatively more women claimed responsibility for about half of the activities, while a greater number of men claimed responsibility for the other half. In redistributive agencies, the only item that approaches statistical significance is explaining the merits of policies to individuals in other agencies and departments. Women are more likely than men to

do so, as approximately 17 percent more women claimed this responsibility. In the constituent policy category, no statistically significant differences emerge.

These findings demonstrate that women's responsibilities are as diverse and multifaceted as men's, suggesting that both sexes are similarly situated within the federal bureaucracy. With very few exceptions, they appear to have similar opportunities to engage in a wide variety of activities, confirming their relatively equal status within the hierarchy. There is little here to suggest that SES women are placed in less discretionary positions than their male colleagues.

Do SES women and men rate their own influence similarly? It appears so, with a few notable exceptions. Overall, there is much agreement as to which activities provide the greatest influence, as SES women and men rank these activities very similarly (table 4). Giving advice to their supervisors or others in positions above them provides both men and women the greatest influence over policy matters, while drafting rules and regulations is perceived as the least influential activity. However, women consider themselves more influential across a variety of these activities than do their male colleagues. For one, women reported exercising relatively greater influence in persuading others to follow their recommendations, as well as cultivating public support for their organization's policies. Other research reports that women tend to rely on democratic, inclusive leadership styles while men often employ authoritarian styles (Eagly and Johnson 1990; Edlund 1992; Helgesen 1990; Reingold 1996; Rosener 1990), and the aforementioned activities may be interpreted as consistent with feminine leadership styles. Women also reported greater influence over policies and programs through recommending program changes, interpreting and applying laws, regulations, and policies, and gathering relevant information. A few other activities approach statistical significance, with women again reporting relatively greater influence when it comes to giving advice to their supervisors, keeping abreast of issues and new developments, setting priorities for their organizations, and choosing among different alternatives for achieving policy goals.

Closer examination of job responsibilities, controlling for agency type, reveals that perceived influence is a function of where one works (table 5). With the exception of distributive agencies, almost all of the original differences in perceived influence disappear. In constituent agencies, there are no significant differences between women and men in terms of their perceived influence, while only a single difference comes close to distinguishing women from men in regulatory agencies (cultivating public support). Nearly half of the original differences persist within redistributive agencies, where women perceive greater influence in interpreting and applying laws, keeping abreast

Table 2 SES Members' Common Responsibilities, by Gender¹

Activity	Percentage who have responsibility	
	Women	Men
Explain merits of policies to ...		
Supervisor	94.6	96.3
Individuals in other agencies and departments	89.1	86.6
Department secretary	73.4	69.6
Office of Management and Budget	67.0	60.7
Congressional committees	60.6	54.7
White House staff	51.8	44.7
Meet with ...		
Interest group representatives	88.2	85.9
Congressional staff	79.1	79.0
Members of Congress	57.3	56.9
Budgeting		
Make budgetary decisions	92.9	91.5
Justified a budget to Congress	57.7	53.3
Justified a budget to the Office of Management and Budget	60.9	57.8
Personnel—Develop ...		
Training policies	80.9	79.8
Recruitment policies	76.6	71.6
Promotion policies	74.8	71.9
Equal employment opportunity policies	71.8	69.7
Policy and Program Involvement		
Keep abreast of issues	99.1	99.8
Gather information	99.1	98.6
Initiate policy ideas	99.1	98.4
Set priorities for organization	99.1	99.1
Recommend changes to regulations, policies or programs	99.1	97.1
Choose among alternatives for achieving policy goals	98.2	99.1
Interpret and apply laws	98.2	96.4
Draft rules and regulations	83.0	81.1

Source: Survey of Senior Executives.

¹None of the differences reported here are statistically significant.

Table 3 SES Members' Common Responsibilities, by Gender and Policy Type

Activity	Percentage who have responsibility							
	Distributive (n=179)		Regulatory (n=127)		Redistributive (n=84)		Constituent (n=172)	
	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M
Explain merits of policies to ...								
Supervisor	93.8*	99.3	92.0	96.9	96.2	87.5	96.2	97.1
Individuals in other agencies and departments	90.6	83.8	80.8	87.5	88.9+	71.9	92.3	94.9
Department Secretary	78.1	69.8	68.0	79.4	73.1	58.9	76.0	66.9
OMB	81.3**	66.2	52.0	55.1	63.0	66.7	72.0	56.1
Congressional committees	71.9*	52.8	48.0	52.6	57.7	56.1	61.5	57.1
White House staff	62.5	54.2	40.0	36.1	50.0	41.1	53.8	42.9
Meet with ...								
Interest group representatives	93.8	90.8	84.6	86.6	88.5	78.9	84.6	83.5
Congressional staff	81.3	79.4	72.0	70.1	81.5	78.9	80.8	84.3
Members of Congress	62.5	54.6	48.0	43.3	61.5	66.7	57.7	64.7
Budgeting								
Make budgetary decisions	91.2	91.6	84.6	90.1	96.3	87.5	100.0	93.8
Justified budget to Congress	63.6	53.2	56.0	47.4	53.8	50.9	53.8	58.3
Justified budget to OMB	72.7	63.6	54.2	52.6	55.6	66.7	59.3	52.5
Personnel—Develop ...								
Training policies	81.3	74.1	84.0	80.4	76.9	82.1	80.8	83.9
Recruitment policies	78.1	69.8	76.9	73.2	77.8	66.7	74.1	74.5
Promotion policies	75.0	63.6	80.0	77.3	73.1	77.2	73.1	74.5
Equal employment opportunity policies	75.8	66.9	66.7	70.1	70.4	66.7	73.1	73.9
Policy and Program Involvement								
Draft rules and regulations	85.3	75.4	76.9	81.4	81.5	75.0	84.6	88.9

Source: Survey of Senior Executives
Male-female differences significant at ** = $p < .10$; * = $p < .05$.

majority (10 of 13) achieve statistical significance.⁶ Comparing these women and men with their female and male colleagues from other agencies highlights some interesting findings. First, women in the distributive and constituent policy organizations rated themselves as the most influential in the sample. That is, these women have slightly higher mean scores for perceived influence than do the women in regulatory and redistributive agencies. Likewise, men who work for constituent policy agencies also reported, on average, the highest levels of perceived influence. But the SES men in distributive agencies accorded themselves relatively less influence than men working in most other agency types. Thus, the female executives found in distributive agencies placed themselves among the most influential in the whole sample, while their male colleagues rated themselves as relatively less influential than most other male executives. Recalling that there were only the slightest dif-

ferences in responsibility between women and men in any of the policy areas, we cannot conclude that these differences occur because women hold more discretionary positions.

Further, women in distributive policy agencies have actually spent significantly less time in their departments (14.5 years versus 18.7 years, $p < 0.04$) and average three fewer years of tenure in the federal government (19.7 versus 23.4 years, $p < 0.04$). Because distributive policy bureaus generally have the most favorable political climate (Meier 1993a, 107) and most regularly involve executive branch officials in policy making (Ripley and Franklin 1991), we could certainly expect all of these executives to feel confident in their ability to influence policy making. Why such a chasm persists in the self-perceived influence of male and female executives is not clear. The Clinton administration appointed women to 27.3 percent of its executive positions in its first term (Garcia 1997). Possibly, this commitment to female appointees simply improved the climate for women in the SES and opened roads to them that had been closed, giving them the sense that their opinions and perspectives were valued and, in turn, making them feel relatively influential. Nonetheless, further research should investigate the reasons for this unexpected gender gap, especially because it differs from findings in so many other political arenas.

Table 4 Perceived Influence over Policy, by Gender

Activity	Mean score on degree of influence scale ^a	
	Women	Men
Give advice to supervisor or those above me	3.66+	3.54
Keep abreast of issues and new developments	3.56+	3.42
Persuade others to follow my recommendations	3.56*	3.42
Gather information	3.50*	3.32
Set priorities for organization	3.45+	3.30
Recommend changes to regulations, policies, or programs	3.40**	3.13
Interpret and apply laws, regulations, and policies	3.40***	3.00
Initiate policy ideas	3.38	3.32
Choose among alternatives for achieving policy goals	3.29+	3.13
Make budgetary decisions	2.89	2.73
Cultivate public support for organization policies	2.73**	2.30
Recruit employees	2.60	2.44
Draft rules and regulations	2.19	2.10

Source: Survey of Senior Executives.

^aScale ranges from 1 to 4, indicating the extent to which the respondent perceives he or she is able to influence policy making in his or her organization. 1 = to no extent; 2 = to a limited extent; 3 = to some extent; 4 = to a great extent.

Male/female differences are significant at + $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 5 Perceived Influence over Policy, by Gender and Policy Type

Activity	Mean score on degree of influence scale ^a							
	Type of policy area							
	Distributive (n = 179)		Regulatory (n = 127)		Redistributive (n = 84)		Constituent (n = 172)	
	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M
Give advice	3.62	3.45	3.56	3.48	3.59	3.33	3.87	3.75
Keep abreast	3.52*	3.20	3.48	3.48	3.56*	3.21	3.68	3.69
Persuade others	3.58*	3.30	3.30	3.30	3.46	3.21	3.71	3.69
Gather information	3.53*	3.16	3.30	3.23	3.52+	3.08	3.62	3.62
Set priorities	3.52*	3.10	3.28	3.28	3.34	3.26	3.63	3.54
Recommend changes	3.55***	2.93	3.24	3.25	3.23	2.82	3.53	3.36
Interpret and apply laws	3.45***	2.73	3.26	3.35	3.38*	2.77	3.45	3.23
Initiate policy ideas	3.43*	3.09	3.26	3.35	3.22	3.24	3.59	3.55
Choose among alternatives	3.32+	2.99	3.26	3.15	3.03	2.82	3.54	3.38
Make budgetary decisions	2.98	2.60	2.53	2.54	3.10	2.77	2.89	2.98
Cultivate public support	2.84*	2.25	2.65+	2.15	2.79	2.46	2.60	2.39
Recruit employees	2.72*	2.27	2.55	2.43	2.60	2.64	2.49	2.53
Draft rules and regulations	2.49**	1.73	1.93	2.12	1.97	1.85	2.28	2.54
Mean size of gender differences	.40		.12		.27		.11	

Source: Survey of Senior Executives.
^aScale ranges from 1 to 4, indicating the extent to which the respondent perceives he or she is able to influence policy making in his or her organization. 1 = to no extent; 2 = to a limited extent; 3 = to some extent; 4 = to a great extent.
 Male/female differences are significant at +p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Conclusions

This research adds to the growing literature on gender and political influence in the federal executive service.⁷ Contrary to research in other spheres, which shows that women exercise less influence and have fewer responsibilities than similarly situated male colleagues, SES women and men have virtually identical job responsibilities. Both male and female senior executives interact with colleagues inside and outside government, command budgetary and personnel responsibilities within their organizations, and use their expertise and political connections to shape government policies and programs. Based on the empirical analysis here, we cannot conclude that SES women have been placed in token positions with fewer opportunities to command the levers of power. Rather, their gains in the top ranks of the SES seem genuine, not illusory.

These data further demonstrate that SES women perceive themselves as more influential than their male colleagues in carrying out a variety of policy-making responsibilities, at least in distributive policy agencies. Although both similarly rank the responsibilities that afford them influence, senior executive women rate themselves as relatively more influential than do their male colleagues on every single activity. Other scholars have suggested that distributive policy agencies provide both women and men with the greatest opportunities to climb the career ladder (Duerst-Lahti 1995 and Kelly; Newman 1995), but this does not explain why such a gender gap persists. Because federal executives were asked to rate their own influence, it is entirely possible that their perceptions do not accurately reflect reality. However, other research suggests that women

often downplay their own accomplishments and devalue the work they do, and so it would be strange if these SES women were actually exaggerating their influence within the federal career service. Examining the actual influence exercised by both male and female federal executives is necessary to sort out whether women are overstating their actual influence, whether men are understating their own, or whether something else is at work.

Although these findings seem to stand in contrast with previous research at the state and municipal level, they provide tentative support that the Civil Service Reform Act, a federal statute that applies only to the federal government, is working. An alternative explanation is that the political climate at the time the survey was administered was particularly conducive to feminine leadership. Again, these surveys were administered during the Clinton administration, which touted an outstanding record of appointing female executives, and so it is not surprising these female executives reported relatively high levels of influence. Second, it bears repeating that these women have done whatever it takes to reach the uppermost echelons of the federal service, and we should recognize the possibility that they may have succeeded by adopting strategies that also work for men. Although the women and the men of the SES appear comparable, probing the extent to which SES women and lower-ranking female civil servants resemble one another would also be instructive. Future research should also further investigate the dynamics operating in distributive agencies which make them appear so conducive to feminine leadership. Additional follow-up

research would enable us to determine whether these particular findings hold up across time, or whether different presidential administrations create different climates that encourage or mitigate against such feminine influence.

This snapshot of the executive ranks of the federal government suggests that the women and men who have made it to the top have fairly equal opportunities to influence the implementation and execution of the nation's policies. The executive women studied here simply do not appear to be stuck in relatively powerless positions with few avenues to shape politics. Instead, this research suggests that women's advancement appears real, not contrived to produce a semblance of gender diversity in the federal executive service. This bodes well for a representative bureaucracy, where female executives enjoy seemingly equal access to the levers of power in the federal bureaucracy.

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Notes

1. However, agencies have made only limited use of this provision of the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 and the vast majority of SES members never leave their own agency (MSPB 1990; OPM 1995).
2. The sampling procedures and representativeness of the sample are detailed elsewhere and are available by contacting the author.
3. These executive core qualifications were revised by the Office of Personnel Management in 1998 and now consist of leading change, leading people, results driven, business acumen, and building coalitions/communications (OPM 1998). Because the survey instrument was administered in the fall of 1996, the old qualifications were used for this research.
4. The sample slightly overrepresents women and men in redistributive organizations, and women by a greater percentage than men. On balance, however, the sample fairly accurately matches the distribution of the SES population across different agency types.
5. Some of these differences may be explained by the different nature of programs administered at the state and federal level. Because the federal government delegates much control over welfare policy to the states, a classic redistributive policy issue, a greater number of senior administrative positions in the redistributive policy arena may be open to both women and men in state-level bureaucracies.
6. Because statistical significance is more difficult to attain with a small number of cases, it is instructive to examine the magnitude of the gender differences between the sexes within each type of agency (the size of the subsamples varies from 84 to 179). Examining the mean difference in perceived influence for men and women in each agency type confirms the original findings, showing that women and men in redistributive agencies are most different from one another in terms of their perceived levels of influence.
7. See also Borrelli and Martin (1997), which contains a few chapters dealing with executive branch appointees, but no research on women in SES positions.

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