

Incumbent Responsiveness to Female Challengers

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How do congressional incumbents respond to challengers, particularly female challengers? This article extends recent research on the effect of congressional challengers on legislative agenda setting by analyzing the symbolic effect of a female challenger on bill sponsorship and cosponsorship of women's issue legislation. The results indicate incumbents who ran against female challengers in the previous election are more likely to respond to that constituency through their legislative activities. However, in practice, there may be few significant policy effects, as incumbents challenged by female opponents are more likely to cosponsor, rather than sponsor, women's issue legislation.

Keywords: Congressional Elections, Challengers, Symbolic Politics, Female Candidates.

¿Cómo responden los miembros del Congreso a los candidatos y especialmente a las candidatas que les disputan su reelección? Este artículo amplía investigaciones recientes sobre el efecto de la presión electoral sobre distritos seguros en la definición de la agenda. Lo hace analizando el efecto simbólico que produce la presión electoral de candidatas femeninas en distritos cuyo representante actual ha sido reelegido varias veces enfocándose en qué tanto dicho representante patrocina o copatrocinna proyectos de ley favorables a las mujeres. Los resultados indican que los representantes que contendieron contra mujeres en elecciones previas están más inclinados a responder al electorado femenino a través de sus actividades legislativas. En la práctica, sin embargo, puede haber pocos efectos políticos significativos, ya que los representantes están más inclinados a copatrocinna que a patrocinar leyes que favorecen a las mujeres.

A recent study investigates the claim that congressional incumbents respond to the concerns of their challengers from the previous election through their legislative activities as a way to increase their chances for reelection and preempt future attacks. They respond by working on issues where they were criticized

previously to demonstrate progress in future election campaigns, which the author calls uptake (Sulkin 2005). This article attempts to apply this theory to women's congressional candidacies and tests whether women's presence as an opponent can influence the legislative activity of the winner as they prioritize their issues in Washington. It is important to apply this to the question of women's candidacies because it extends the scholarship on legislative activism on women's issues beyond the walls of Congress. Substantial research indicates that members of Congress are influenced by the goal of reelection (Jacobson 2008) and that district factors influence sponsorship behavior (Swers 2002), but the connection between election opponents and work in Washington is still unclear. Previous work has focused on the mobilizing impact of symbolic candidates on voters, or in a limited way on opponents during a campaign, while this analysis connects this work with the large body of research on legislating women's issues in Congress. If the presence of women on the ballot does have an effect, it may be that female candidates can actually push women's issue agendas forward by mounting campaigns for Congress, even if they are unsuccessful.

This article investigates this question in a preliminary fashion by assessing whether having a female opponent in the 2004 election influences legislative activity, defined as sponsorship or cosponsorship of bills, on women's issues in the following Congress, in this case, House members in the 109th Congress. It is also important to examine which legislators are most likely to be influenced by a female opponent as well as whether this "uptake" is a substantive response with significant policy implications. There is some evidence this effect exists, but that the symbolic presence of a woman on the ballot may only inspire a marginal legislative response.

Literature Review

To fully understand the impact of women's candidacies, we should examine both the substantive and symbolic impact of those candidates. Symbolic decisions can be distinguished from purely short-term self-interested decisions, and are typically general predispositions learned during socialization that shape political attitudes in new circumstances. People do not often reflect about the specific costs and benefits of these values, but they can shape responses to important political issues (Sears *et al.* 1980). For example, voters tend to have a baseline preference for male or female candidates, and this has important consequences for voting (Sanbonmatsu 2002b). In general, female candidates are evaluated differently from male candidates due to the application of stereotypes, which can be broken down into two categories: ideology and policy specialization (Dolan 2005). Women are generally stereotyped as more liberal than men, with Republican women and Democratic women being evaluated as more liberal than their male counterparts (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Koch 2002; Matland and King 2002; McDermott 1998). Female candidates are also viewed as having a particular expertise in policy areas, such as poverty,

education, or children's issues (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Evaluations of men and women may also differ by institution (Smith, Paul, and Paul 2007), and there are times when women's ideology or policy specialization can benefit them, depending on the electoral context and the issues in which voters are most interested (Dolan 1998; Pluzter and Zipp 1996). Women candidates may be more likely to be recognized by voters because they are still atypical for national politics, often portraying themselves as "outsiders" and are most successful when they run as women, targeting women's groups and issues (Darcy and Schramm 1977; Herrnson, Lay, and Stokes 2003; Shames 2003). Once in office, female members of Congress are also more likely to sponsor and cosponsor women's issue legislation (Swers 2002).

However, voter evaluations are just a small part of the overall underrepresentation of women in Congress. Party recruitment, the willingness of female candidates to run, and the presence of women in lower-level offices with the qualifications to run in strategically favorable districts are key explanations (Burrell 1992; Duerst-Lahti 1998; Lawless and Fox 2005; Sanbonmatsu 2006). In the 1970s, women were more likely to be "sacrificial lambs;" recruited for seats with a low probability of winning because of a strong incumbent (Deber 1982; Diamond 1977; Gertzog and Simard 1981). This allowed parties to "respond to pressures to recruit women without risking the loss of a seat" (Carroll 1994, 42). As they typically had virtually no chance of winning in "sacrificial" races, part of the concern was that those women's candidacies were merely symbolic, showing that the parties were running women candidates even if they did not have a chance to win. Women running for congressional seats became increasingly professionalized and strategic in their candidacies, winning as often as men, so concern over sacrificial lambs abated (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994; Gertzog 1995; Pearson and McGhee 2004). At the same time, studies of party elites suggest that party recruiters still do not believe women's electoral chances are equal to those of male candidates and that social networks may not be available to women to the same extent as men, although this may differ by party (Burrell 1994; Carroll 1994; Gertzog and Simard 1981; Niven 1998; Sanbonmatsu 2002a, 2006; Stambough and O'Regan 2007). Recruitment itself then is not understood as an end in itself; the goal is to run female candidates who can win. What is less understood is whether having a female candidate on the ballot has any effect not contingent on their success.

Virginia Sapiro (1993) notes that although stereotypes about women in office are important for understanding attitudes about women candidates, an often-ignored question is the symbolic impact of women: how we interpret the meaning of women's candidacies. The symbolic value of women's candidacies has been demonstrated in a number of studies, but most of these have focused on how they may change voter behavior, especially that of female voters. Underrepresented groups may feel disaffected from politics if they do not see people participating who look like them. Therefore, women in political positions and as candidates are cues which encourage political participation

among other women. They fight stereotypes about women's ability to serve in political offices, create a belief that government is responsive to women's interests, result in women having more positive attitudes toward female members of Congress, and encourage women to discuss politics more (Atkeson and Carrillo 2007; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Hansen 1997; Karp and Banducci 2008; Koch 1997; Sapiro and Conover 1997; Stokes-Brown and Neal 2008). In particular, Dolan (2006) notes that symbolic effects do not seem to be limited to women of a particular party or women who run competitive races.

It is important to remark that these studies do not focus usually on the agendas of female candidates, but instead note that there may be changes in behavior or attitudes among voters just by the presence of women candidates. There is contradictory evidence about whether candidates need to be viable to have the proposed effect that perhaps only competitive female candidates can increase the political engagement of female constituents (Atkeson 2003; Dolan 2006). Others have argued that previous findings about the symbolic values of female candidates on voters are overstated (Dolan 2006; Lawless 2004). However, if there are potential mobilizing effects from female candidates on voters, then it is also possible that an incumbent would respond to having a female opponent by reaching out symbolically to female constituents to counter those effects.

There is limited evidence that the presence of a female candidate in a race can affect symbolically the strategic decisions of their opponents, at least during campaigns. One study of congressional candidates in California in the 1990s found that male candidates reached out to female voters to a greater extent when they ran against female candidates. They were more likely to take positions on women's issues, endorse other local female candidates, increase female campaign personnel, and target women voters, for example, mobilizing women's organizations that support the candidate. These male candidates were also more hesitant to attack female opponents, suggesting decisions to go negative may be influenced by the opponent's gender (Fox 1997; see also Bystrom and Kaid 2002; Herrnson and Lucas 2006; Melich 2005). Fox (1997, 54) cites one campaign manager who notes that their male candidate's advertising targeted women when facing a female opponent, claiming "we wanted voters to see that the congressman was there for women too." Another noted "if his opponent ran around claiming that she was the candidate for women, we could combat this by demonstrating our support from women" (54). This suggests that male candidates were responding to the potential for a female candidate to claim she was symbolically "the candidate for women" and trying to preempt those claims by modifying their campaign strategy to show responsiveness to women in the district. Other case studies find examples of this same response, including Arlen Specter's and Bruce Hershensohn's strategic change in focus to women's issues and women's groups during their campaigns against Lynn Yeakel and Barbara Boxer, respectively (Renner 1993; Tolleson-Rinehart 1994). It is possible then

that once an incumbent has faced a female candidate, their changing reelection strategy may not just be limited to mobilizing constituent groups or campaign advertising—it is also likely that they may respond symbolically to a female candidate once they are back in Washington by cosponsoring or sponsoring bills that allow them to preempt future female challengers (or a repeat challenge from their female opponent) and show constituents mobilized by a female opponent that they are “for women.” This may not be limited to male incumbents either. A female challenger could compete potentially for the mantle of being more “for women” than a female incumbent. Female congressional incumbents are more likely to face challengers, particularly female challengers, which also suggest their presence encourage other women to enter the race (Palmer and Simon 2005, 2008).

Another study explored whether men’s issue priorities change in campaigns when their opponent is a woman (Dolan 2008). However, Dolan (2008) does not find significant differences between the issue priorities of men who ran against women versus those who ran against men, with one exception. She finds that men who ran against women were slightly less likely to discuss abortion. This may be evidence of a reverse effect; that men are less likely to want to discuss women’s issues during the campaign to avoid priming the public on those issues. Unfortunately, the response to the presence of a female opponent remains a significantly understudied question, and there is currently little evidence concerning effects outside of the typical campaign season.

The evidence thus far raises the question of how responses to a female candidate during a campaign might translate into legislative activity, which is at least partly focused on building a record geared toward reelection (Mayhew 2004). Fenno (2003) describes members’ linkage with their constituents as “developmental,” it is only by continually reinterpreting the constituency context, adjusting and negotiating through trial-and-error responses that members build trust and connect with their constituents. He also notes that part of that constituency linkage can be a symbolic connection, at least in the case of black members of Congress (Fenno 2003). Although legislators are risk averse, and are reelected at very high rates, they are also uncertain about the confidence with which they can calculate their likelihood of losing the next election. Uncertainty comes from the complexity of representation and the type and quality of information available (Maestas 2003). Political actors prefer to reduce uncertainty, and one way they can do this is through their legislative activity—showing they are responsive to their constituents (Burden 2003; Fenno 1978; Maestas 2003).

A recent study by Sulkin (2005) focuses on the link between campaigning and legislative activity, demonstrating that what happens in a campaign in turn influences the subsequent legislative activity of the winner. Uptake is the process by which legislators incorporate and respond to the agendas of their opponents in the campaign. Members take the issues highlighted in the campaign and minimize their future vulnerability by building a stronger record through their

legislative activity in Washington. Sulkin (2005) finds legislative activities that respond to challenger issue agendas make up a significant amount of activity by legislators, including sponsorship, cosponsorship, and floor statements. Senators are also more likely to engage in this activity because they have a greater ability to generalize and are more electorally vulnerable. In the House, there is also the particular threat of repeat challengers, who can be more effective than even experienced, quality first-time challengers (Mack 1998).

This framework shifts the focus of measuring responsiveness from preferences to agenda setting. Members decide not just how to vote but which issues to give attention to and with what intensity (Hall 1996; Sulkin 2005; Swers 2002). Bill sponsorship requires members to prioritize the issue, investing their time to be one of the typically few members who are involved in the early stages of drafting and fine-tuning legislation, which makes sponsorship an indicator of whether an issue is a priority for a member and how intensely they support the issue (Hall 1996). However, cosponsorship is a means for sponsors to build coalitions and demonstrate support for a particular bill to leadership. For individual members, cosponsorship is a particularly low-cost way for members to show that they have an interest in a certain issue area, even if it does not come up for a roll-call vote, and the amount of cosponsorship activity does not depend upon their electoral vulnerability (Kessler and Krehbiel 1996). Bill sponsorship is more costly. Schiller (1995) also notes that resources (time, energy), opportunity costs, and political costs of sponsoring an unpopular bill make this activity more perilous; therefore, senior members with greater institutional power and those with greater resources are the most likely to sponsor greater numbers of bills. For example, Republican women were less willing to invest their time and resources into developing feminist legislation once in the majority, given their party's opposition, but cosponsored legislation at similar levels while in both the majority and minority (Swers 2005).

This framework also complements the idea that members of Congress try to anticipate future issues of interest to their constituents, which shapes the policy proposals that will be prioritized by members of Congress (Arnold 1990). Those issues that could serve as leverage for future challengers or other dissatisfied groups within the district shape legislators' decisions, as they try to address the concerns of subconstituencies within the legally defined geographic district (Fenno 1978). Bishin (2000) identifies "prospective constituencies" that legislators will target, even if they include both extremists and centrists, because it is unclear which voters will be mobilized in the next election. For the purposes of this study, a female challenger may be a symbol of a subconstituency that could be mobilized in the next election, and therefore a member could respond to the potential threat by building a record on women's issues.

If uptake occurs through the substantive aspects of campaigning, such as issue agendas, the question remains if it is possible through symbolic candidacies by particular constituent groups, inspiring a symbolic responsiveness by focusing

legislative agenda toward those constituent needs in the subsequent election. If female candidates are mobilizing women through their presence on the ballot, winners who faced female opponents may attempt to shore up their resume on women's issue activities and preempt this concern in the future as part of the process of negotiating stronger connections to their constituency.

This article assesses the extent to which women's symbolic candidacies might spur responsive legislative activity—sponsorships or cosponsorships of women's issue legislation, even when they are not successful. The expectation is that because symbolic candidacies just require women's presence on the ballot, legislative responses will also be low cost and require few resources. Therefore, I expect responsiveness via cosponsorship activity, but not through bill sponsorship.

Data and Methods

The article assesses whether the symbolic nature of women's candidacies influence the legislative activities of incumbents in the subsequent Congress. The hypothesis under scrutiny then is that having a female opponent in the previous election will increase the likelihood of sponsoring or cosponsoring women's issue bills. The study includes both male and female members of Congress, because it is possible that a woman challenger may spark increased activity on women's issues for both men and women.

To test this hypothesis, I use data collected from the 2004 House congressional elections and the legislative activity of the 435 members of the 109th Congress. The 2004 elections were still dominated by Republicans, who maintained their hold on unified government after November. The election itself was not particularly favorable to women's issues, with the presidential and congressional elections generally focused on national security issues as the country was faced with the war in Iraq (Jacobson 2008). Therefore, this is a good election–Congress cohort to choose, given that the Republican-controlled Congress did not emphasize women's issues on its agenda, making this a difficult case to show gendered effects. The focus is on House races, which could underestimate the effect of women's candidacies, as the effects of issue uptake on opponents seem to be greater in Senate races (Sulkin 2005). However, other research finds symbolic mobilization has a greater impact in House races (Dolan 2006). Data are official election results from each of the states and from the Library of Congress website on the sponsorship or cosponsorship of bills (*The Library of Congress* 2010). I focus on sponsorship and cosponsorship activities because they reveal more about a member's agendas than roll-call voting, since partisan agendas drive which issues will be voted upon in the House (Swers 2005; Tamerius 1995).

To compile the dependent variable, sponsorship or cosponsorship of women's issues, it is necessary to identify "women's issue bills" which have varying definitions (Barnello and Bratton 2007). The operationalization used

here is a measure based on bills advocated for by three women's advocacy groups. This is modeled on the way that Swers (1998, 2002) defines women's issues, using the legislative priorities of women's groups to highlight key women's issue bills in that Congress. This method gives us an independent measure of women's issue bills, from organizations which strategic members might turn to in order to respond to women's mobilized concerns after facing a female opponent. To do this, I use legislative priorities of the National Organization for Women (NOW 2010), Women's Policy Inc. (WPI 2010), and the American Association of University Women for America (AAUW 2010). Their legislative priorities for the 109th Congress were found on their websites.¹ The dependent variable is an additive count of the number of bills each member sponsored or cosponsored of all the legislative priorities of these three organizations. Although NOW and the AAUW tend to focus on feminist issue priorities, WPI tracks legislation that is both liberal and conservative. Therefore, since the main dependent variable does not include only feminist women's priorities, it was necessary to separate out the issues that specifically mention women and children in the analysis into a second dependent variable, labeled "feminist issue bills" rather than "women's issue bills." More specifically, the measure only includes bills almost exclusively related to women; the feminist measure does not include such interest group priorities as a financial literacy month designation or budget changes to welfare, but does include the Gynecologic Cancer Education and Awareness and national domestic violence month bills, and issues related to children, such as reauthorizing the mentoring of children of prisoners program. An additional concern is that responses to female opponents will be more likely to be minimal and broadly popular, rather than significantly and substantively feminist, and therefore the presence of a female opponent will be less correlated with feminist legislation. The expectation is that female opponents will have a smaller effect on sponsorship activity, which requires more of an investment of time and resources in the legislation, than cosponsorship, which requires fewer costs and resources than sponsorship. This is because sponsoring broadly popular legislation is a low-risk, low-impact indication of support for women's issues, whereas feminist legislation may be ideologically problematic for moderate or conservative members, making it a more radical response to a female challenger. Negative binomial regression analysis is used, since the data are a count of bills sponsored or cosponsored and because the data are overdispersed, making Poisson analysis inappropriate (Long 1997).

¹ I looked at the priorities for two conservative women's issues, but almost none of the bills they prioritized were largely directed toward women. In 2004, the priorities of conservative women's groups were the priorities of conservative groups generally—national security. Therefore, those are not included in this analysis.

The independent variable of interest in each of the analyses presented below is the presence of a female opponent in the 2004 general election.² I confirmed the sex of the incumbent's 2004 opponent through House website searches and summaries from the *Almanac of American Politics* (Barone and Cohen 2003). I also include a number of additional variables that explain sponsorship behavior of women's issues, as suggested by the findings of Swers (2002), which will also make comparisons to previous work easier. First, I expect that women legislators and Democratic legislators will both be more likely to sponsor women's issue bills than men and Republican legislators, with male Republican legislators having the lowest likelihood of sponsoring women's issue bills, and female Democratic lawmakers the highest (Swers 2002).

I also control for a number of other important variables. I use the DW-NOMINATE score as a measure of ideology (Poole and Rosenthal 1997), expecting that more conservative legislators will be less likely to support women's issue bills. The scale is coded so that more conservative members are more positive, so I would expect a negative relationship. There are also other potential influences on bill introductions, such as being on a women's subcommittee, particularly for male representatives (Barnello and Bratton 2007; Hall 1996; Swers 2002). Those who are members of committees that specialize in issues traditionally considered of concern to women, such as health or education, will be more likely to sponsor or cosponsor this type of legislation. For consistency, I use the subcommittees identified by Swers (2002) in her analysis of sponsorship and cosponsorship from the 104th Congress, since Republicans still controlled the House in 2004.³ The models include three standard measures of district-level variables to account for constituency factors to measure indirectly the ideology of the district: district median income, whether the district is in a southern state according to the Census regions, and the percentage of the district that is black; all are based on census data. Although these do not directly measure a district's inclination for prioritizing women's issues, they have been demonstrated to be linked to member sponsorship behavior in previous studies of women's issue legislation (Swers 2002). There are other important characteristics of legislators aside from gender, including whether they are a minority member, defined here as being classified as Latino, Asian-American, Native American, or Black. I also

² I did run the analysis with primary opponents, but it was not significant in any of the models. For space concerns, those analyses are not included. Unopposed candidates are coded as not having a female opponent and are included in the analysis.

³ These include Appropriations subcommittees on Labor, Health and Human Services and Education, Economic and Educational Opportunities subcommittees on Early Childhood, Youth, and Families, Post-Secondary Education, Training, and Life-Long Learning, Employer-Employee Relations, and Workforce Protections, Commerce subcommittee on Health and Environment, Judiciary subcommittee on Crime, and Ways and Means subcommittee on Health.

include the year the member was elected to control for expertise gained during longer tenures and therefore a greater ease in certain policy areas and familiarity in sponsoring legislation. Aside from that, it is particularly difficult for freshmen legislators to pick up on the nuances of representation as well as hitting the ground running on introducing and cosponsoring legislation (Hall 1996). A variable is also included to indicate if the member is a committee chair or an elected member of the party leadership, as they may be more likely to sponsor important pieces of legislation, but less likely to sponsor bills overall. Therefore, I include a dummy variable for freshmen members with the expectation that they will likely introduce significantly fewer bills than all other members.

Last, there is a debate within the literature about the role of the competitiveness of the election in spurring mobilization or engagement within the electorate as well as among legislators themselves around particular issue agendas (Atkeson 2003; Dolan 2006; Sulkin 2005). Therefore, I include a variable to measure whether the election was competitive, with the expectation that more competitive elections will spur greater responses from incumbents in their legislative activities than incumbents who are not perceived as vulnerable. Competitiveness is defined as the winner receiving less than 60 percent of the vote (Herrnson 2004).

Results

The 2004 congressional elections were fairly typical. As usual, only a few challengers overtook incumbents in congressional races. One of these was a woman, Melissa Bean, who defeated incumbent Phil Crane of Illinois. Four incumbents lost in the general election, but one, Nick Lampson, was one of several Democratic incumbents Republicans redistricted into less favorable districts. The percentage of winners who ran against female candidates was similar to the percentage of women in Congress. This is not surprising, since the lack of women in Congress can be traced to the lack of women candidates in the pipeline, rather than their rates of success (Duerst-Lahti 1998; Lawless and Fox 2005). The statistics in Table 1 show that 18 percent of members of the 2005-06 Congress had female opponents in the general election. Historically, female incumbents are more likely to be challenged than male incumbents, and for women challengers to run against them (Palmer and Simon 2008). In 2004, approximately the same percentage of men and women ran against female opponents. However, when I break down the numbers into party cohorts, Republican men and Democratic women were slightly more likely to face a female opponent. Democratic women were more likely to face a female opponent than Republican female incumbents. Also listed in Table 1 are the descriptive statistics for the three dependent variables. Each has a fairly wide range with members sponsoring or cosponsoring on average 14 women's issue bills in the 109th Congress and eleven feminist issue bills.

To test whether on average there are differences among the four sex/party cohorts, the means for each group, broken down by whether they faced a female opponent, are presented in Table 2. In this initial test, the average number of women’s issue bills sponsored is higher for most groups having a female opponent compared to similar legislators without a female opponent. The exception is Democratic women, who already have the highest average number of women’s issue bills introduced. The only statistically significant differences in means were among Republicans. On average, Republican men endorsed two more women’s issue bills than those who did not face a female opponent, and

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Female Opponents and Dependent Variables

Female Opponents	
Candidates with female opponents	18.2%
Female winners with female opponents	17.9%
Male winners with female opponents	18.2%
Democrats with female opponents	15.3%
Republicans with female opponents	20.8%
Female democrats with female opponents	20%
Female republicans with female opponents	13.6%
Male democrats with female opponents	14.1%
Male republicans with female opponents	21.5%
Dependent variables	
Women’s issue bills	
Minimum	1
Maximum	37
Mean	14.96
Standard deviation	7.75
Feminist issue bills	
Minimum	0
Maximum	32
Mean	11.27
Standard deviation	7.38

Table 2. Mean Number of Women’s Issue Bills Sponsored or Cosponsored by Party/Sex Cohort

	Female Opponent	No Female Opponent	<i>t</i>
Republican men	12.38	9.77	2.937**
Republican women	18.33	14.52	1.284****
Democratic women	22.00	23.11	-0.520
Democratic men	19.47	18.45	0.612

Note: * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$; **** $p \leq .1$.

Table 3. Female Opponent Effect on Sponsorship/Cosponsorship of Women's Issue and Feminist Legislation

	Women's Issue Legislation Sponsored and Cosponsored	Feminist Legislation Sponsored and Cosponsored
Female opponent	.094** (.036)	.065**** (.040)
Female Democrat	.098** (.040)	.117** (.045)
Female Republican	.321*** (.089)	.313** (.106)
Male Republican	.008 (.073)	-.099 (.086)
Ideology	-.373*** (.078)	-.661*** (1.091)
Women's subcommittee	.043**** (.029)	-.023 (.034)
District median income	.0001*** (.00001)	.0001*** (.00001)
District % black	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)
Competitive race	.035 (.035)	.065**** (.041)
Year elected	.005** (.002)	.005* (.002)
Minority legislator	.022 (.045)	.047 (.050)
Freshman legislator	-.108* (.053)	-.088** (.061)
South	-.030 (.034)	-.023 (.040)
Committee chair	-.075* (.044)	-.106* (.050)
Total number of bills sponsored/ cosponsored	.002*** (.0001)	.001*** (.0001)
Constant	-8.173* (4.156)	-121.595* (62.944)
N	435	435
Log-likelihood	-1226.54	-1142.06
Chi-square	526.70***	610.61***

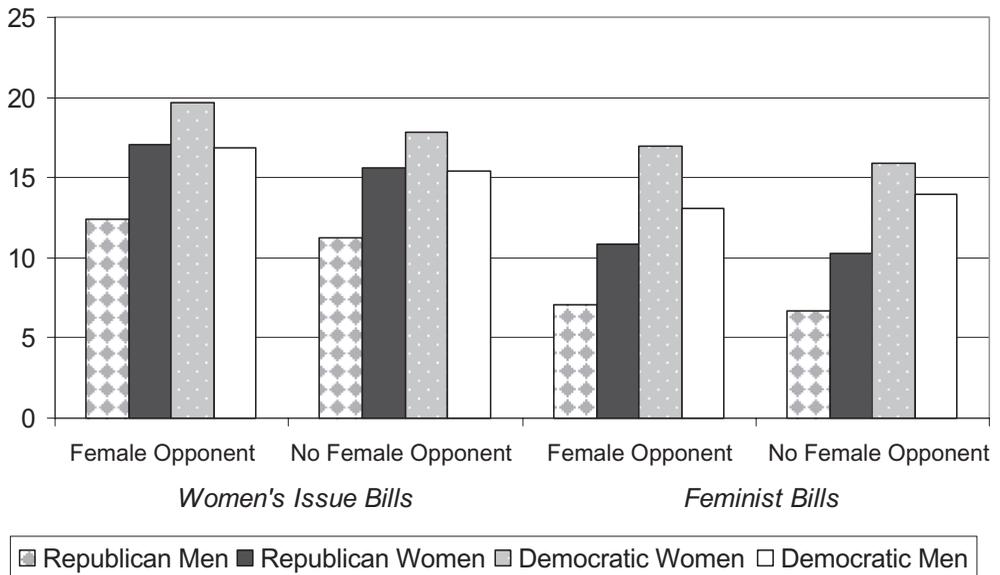
Note: * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$; **** $p \leq .1$.

for Republican women the difference was nearly four more bills. For Republican women, responding to a female opponent may be particularly important. This is in accord with Palmer and Simon's (2008) findings that women incumbents are more likely to be challenged by female candidates, and Republican women, being in a close majority, would have found it important to respond effectively to female challengers.

The hypothesis under investigation is that having a female opponent will affect the incumbent's legislative behavior, specifically sponsorship and cosponsorship of women's issue legislation. Table 3 presents two separate tests of this hypothesis using negative binomial regression on the additive dependent variable measuring the number of bills they sponsored or cosponsored.⁴ The second column presents findings on the number of women's issue bills sponsored or cosponsored, and the third column measures how well they

⁴ I also ran the equations using ordinary least squares, which is less appropriate for counts, but found very similar results with the two equations, particularly for the independent variable of interest, having a female opponent.

Figure 1.
Predicted Probabilities of Women’s Issue and Feminist Bills Sponsored or Cosponsored



explain cosponsorship activities on feminist bills. Beginning with the second column, members who had female opponents in the previous election sponsored or cosponsored more women’s issue legislation. This supports the hypothesis that women’s candidacies affect legislative behavior, even if they do not win the election, and uptake extends to the symbolic value of a candidacy, in addition to issue agendas. To ease interpretation of the coefficient, Figure 1 presents predicted probabilities of the mean number of bills sponsored/cosponsored.⁵ The differences are fairly small, suggesting that having a female opponent may only have a moderate substantive effect. However, all of the differences are in the expected direction, and are approximately similar in size among the four cohorts; members with a female opponent had a greater probability of sponsoring or cosponsoring one to two additional women’s issue bills, compared to an average number of 14. Neither ideology nor competition affected the difference in the means.

Several other variables are related to the likelihood of sponsoring or cosponsoring women’s issue legislation, and the other independent variables model closely previous work by Swers (2002) for better comparison. As it would lead us to expect, female legislators were much more likely to sponsor or

⁵ Predicted probabilities were calculated using means/modes, including ideology, for each of the four sex/party cohorts.

cosponsor women's issue legislation. Swers (2002) analyzed the 103rd and 104th Congresses, and in 2004, it was still the case that both Republican and Democratic women took the lead on sponsoring and cosponsoring women's issues bills. In findings similar to Swers, the strong coefficient in the regression and the predicted probabilities in Figure 1 show that Republican women had higher levels of sponsorship than all other groups, including feminist legislation.

Ideology is also strongly correlated with sponsorship behavior, with liberals more likely to sponsor women's issue bills. Similarly, committee membership is a factor in explaining legislative behavior, especially when it comes to sponsoring bills and beginning the long journey to win a bill's passage (Hall 1996). Those who are members of women's issue subcommittees are more likely to sponsor legislation in those issue areas where they have greater expertise and can directly shape the bill from the original markup process. Constituency factors also influence member's behavior, and in this case, the district's median income is significantly related to sponsorship; members from higher income districts tend to endorse more women's issue bills. Members elected more recently are more likely to sponsor a women's issue bill. This holds even when a dummy variable for freshmen legislators is included. Freshmen legislators were less likely to sponsor bills, given the steep learning curve during the first term in office.

The results are generally similar for the third column of Table 3, which looks only at feminist legislation, with an important exception. The hypothesis that members with a female opponent will be more likely to sponsor or cosponsor larger numbers of feminist issue bills no longer meets the 95 percent threshold for significance, although just misses. The differences between predicted probabilities reinforce that the effect for feminist bills is smaller than for women's issue bills. Incumbents challenged by women candidates are not necessarily more active than similar incumbents not challenged by women on feminist issues, but only on issues framed as women's issues. Members may endorse bills that both appeal to women's issues and are ideologically aligned with their priorities. The results also indicate that being on a women's issue subcommittee is not associated with sponsoring or cosponsoring feminist legislation, indicating that members of those committees do not necessarily support legislation aimed to assist women and children. Feminist agendas are not necessarily associated with subcommittee membership. This increases the importance of female legislator's greater focus on legislation specifically directed toward women and children (Swers 2002).

Previous work has distinguished between sponsorship and cosponsorship activities, as they required different levels of commitment (Swers 2002; Tamerius 1995). Sponsoring a bill requires more time and resources than signing on as a cosponsor, which is a fairly simple process. Therefore, Table 4 presents the findings for sponsorship and cosponsorship of women's issue bills. Mirroring the findings from the previous regression, having a female opponent

Table 4. Female Opponent Effect on Women's Issue Sponsorship and Cosponsorship

	Women's Issue Legislation Sponsored	Women's Issue Legislation Cosponsored
Female opponent	.349 (.335)	.089** (.035)
Female Democrat	.878* (.448)	.091* (.042)
Female Republican	2.487** (.837)	.297*** (.091)
Male Republican	1.939** (.738)	-.019 (.073)
Ideology	-.518 (.716)	-.417*** (.079)
Women's subcommittee	.511* (.267)	.037 (.030)
District median income	.00003** (.00001)	.0001*** (.00001)
District % black	-.013 (.012)	.001 (.001)
Competitive race	-.583*** (.359)	.047 (.035)
Year elected	-.022 (.018)	.005** (.002)
Minority legislator	1.227* (.494)	.011 (.046)
Freshman legislator	-1.169*** (.797)	-.102** (.053)
South	-.174 (.321)	-.024 (.035)
Committee chair	.729* (.353)	-.093** (.045)
Total bills sponsored or cosponsored	.001 (.0009)	.001*** (.0001)
Constant	40.357 (36.852)	-9.408* (4.194)
<i>N</i>	435	435
Chi-square	55.24***	547.01***
Log-likelihood	-228.678	-1231.4739

Note: * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$; **** $p \leq .1$.

is not related to bill sponsorship but is related to cosponsorship. Predicted probabilities for cosponsorship are very similar to those for women's issues in Table 3, with a female opponent having a similar effect. For each sex/party cohort, members who faced a female opponent cosponsored slightly more than one additional bill.

Comparing the factors that influence bill sponsorship and cosponsorship, Republicans, particularly women, were also more likely than Democratic men to sponsor women's issue legislation, although this may be attributed to their majority status. In contrast to previous findings (Swers 2002), committee chairs and minority legislators are more likely to sponsor women's issue legislation. Once again, district income and sitting on a woman's subcommittee are associated with sponsoring women's issue legislation. As for cosponsorship, the findings are quite similar to the findings from Table 3. Cosponsorship is less strongly associated with committee membership, reinforcing the idea that even those members who do not have a relevant subcommittee assignment and expertise can easily sign to legislation as a cosponsor. Overall, the key finding is that female challengers inspire incumbents to respond through cosponsorship of women's issue bills, but not through the more demanding sponsorship.

Conclusion

In sum, the concept of uptake applies symbolically to having a female opponent as well as to challenger issue priorities. The concept of uptake functions in the same way as a Republican incumbent having a particularly conservative primary opponent, which would encourage the incumbent to make overtures through their legislative activities to show they are in touch with those constituencies. This article found that congressional candidates, both male and female and of both parties, respond to having a female opponent by focusing on women's issue legislation to a greater extent. However, the reactions to female opponents in turn are likely to be as minimal as possible. Although cosponsorship of women's issue bills increases after emerging from a campaign against a female opponent, this does not hold for bill sponsorship. It is also not the case that feminist issue bill sponsorship or cosponsorship increases significantly after having a female opponent. The largest impact of female opponents is on Republican female incumbents, who may respond to Democratic female opponents by boosting their support for women's issues, but overall, the substantive effects were fairly small. Although some party/sex cohorts are slightly more responsive than others, it is interesting to note that the findings in this study do not depend on partisanship or competitiveness; all cohorts are likely to respond to having a female candidate. Instead, women's candidacies can have a symbolic impact in the same way they can mobilize and ignite female constituents to see politics differently and participate more. There are links between members' constituents and their behavior in Washington, and something that helps them to assess their vulnerability and respond to it, even if just in a moderate way, allows them to show constituent groups they have a record of supporting their concerns. Female challengers can provide that impetus to create a record of responsiveness on women's issues.

The results once again highlight the importance of the pipeline and explaining the gender gap in political ambition (Duerst-Lahti 1998; Lawless and Fox 2005). If women's unsuccessful candidacies can make even a marginal impact on the legislative activities of their opponents, this may make their presence on the ballot even more important for congressional responsiveness to women's issues. Therefore, those who hope to raise the priority of women's issues in Congress should continue to support women's candidacies, as they may spark responsiveness to the issues about which they care. It also points to the importance of continuing recruitment efforts, and exploring the subtle inequities that continue to exist in this process because not only does it increase the likelihood of women winning, it may symbolically mobilize female voters and their opponents. The presence of women on the ballot is important and can have symbolic and some substantive effects.

These findings suggest other avenues for further research, building upon previous work on the symbolic impact of candidacies. First, the empirical

literature on how the presence of a female candidate might influence their male opponent is slim, although there is a growing literature on the symbolic mobilization of female voters. More research is needed to draw out the ways in which female opponents might trigger different types of reactions than male opponents, and this could be true for both male and female incumbents. In this way, women's presence in politics may have an indirect effect on agendas and policy priorities. It would also be fruitful to consider the ways in which women's candidacies might have a symbolic impact beyond voters, and this could potentially include the national parties or interest groups aside from just their opponent. As we come upon the twentieth anniversary of the "Year of the Woman," we might reflect broadly upon how the meaning of women's candidacies in that year was symbolically interpreted beyond individual candidate decisions or successes. Considering the way that symbols are interpreted, particularly when it comes to women, is a potential avenue for research that is not often linked with empirical studies of Congress.

About the Author

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