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Partisan Dynamics of the Gender Gap among State Legislators

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Overall, women state legislators today are more liberal in their political ideology and policy attitudes than their male colleagues. Today's gender gap is due more to the disproportionate number of Democrats among women legislators. The greatest change over time has taken place among Republican women representatives, who are more conservative and more like their male counterparts.

In nationwide surveys of state legislators conducted in 1977, 1981, and 1988, the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, found a sizable "gender gap" in public policy attitudes among legislators similar to the gender gap that has been apparent among the general public in recent elections. On many (but not all) public policy issues, women state legislators in the 1970s and 1980s were more likely than their male colleagues to express liberal views. Women legislators also were more likely to identify themselves as "liberals" and less likely to call themselves "conservatives" than were their male counterparts.¹

But what about today's legislators? Is the gender gap of the 1970s and 1980s still as evident today? And is it apparent within both parties?

There are reasons to expect that gender differences may have lessened in the 1990s and that women legislators today may be more conservative and more like their male colleagues ideologically than they were a decade or so ago. The political environment of the 1990s was more politically conservative than the preceding decades, and the women elected to state legislatures competed successfully in this more conservative climate. As one indicator of the increasingly conservative climate, Republicans running for state legislatures fared much better in the 1990s than they had in the 1980s. According to *The Book of the States*, 1988-89 Edition, 38.2 percent of state senators and 29.0 percent of state representatives throughout the country were Republicans in 1987-88.² By January 2002, these Republican proportions had increased dramatically to 47.0 percent of state senators and 47.8 percent of state representatives.³

Another reason to expect that women legislators may now be more conservative than they were a decade ago is related to the particular states which have seen the greatest growth in the numbers of women lawmakers in recent years. One analysis concluded that women initially made inroads in states with the most hospitable climates—for example, states with disproportionately liberal and well-educated voters. A further observation was: "More recently, women have begun to make rapid progress in the set of states that might be thought of as constituting the 'second tier' of hospitality to women candidates. These states have voters who are not quite as well educated or as liberal as the early leader states,

but who are better educated and more liberal than in states with fewer women legislators."⁴

One would expect that the women elected in these second-tier states, like the voters in these states, might be less liberal than those from states where women made their initial gains, and as a result, one might expect women legislators today to be somewhat more conservative than they were several years ago.

If there has been a shift toward greater conservatism among women state legislators and a reduction in the ideological gender gap, then changes should be most evident among Republicans. The Christian Right, which became an increasingly influential force in U.S. politics in the 1990s, pursued a very partisan strategy, working within the Republican Party and becoming a dominant force in the party organizations of several states.⁵ Since several states experienced substantial growth in the number of women legislators over the same time period that the Christian Right was exerting great influence in the Republican Party within those states, one might expect that some of the growth in the numbers of women legislators over the 1990s reflected the movement of more conservative Republican women into office.

As the Christian Right gained a greater stronghold in the Republican Party, some moderate Republican women voiced their concern that their party was less hospitable to their views in the 1990s than it was in earlier decades.⁶ Moderate Republican women not only may have felt less comfortable within their party, but also may have found it increasingly difficult to win nominations as social conservatives assumed a more dominant role. If elected, they may have found it more difficult to move the more moderate items on their legislative agendas, leading them to have less interest in continuing in office.

The remainder of this article examines whether the gender gap in ideological self-identification and policy attitudes so evident in the 1970s and 1980s continues to exist and whether women legislators have become more conservative in recent years. The data presented are from nationwide surveys of women and men legislators conducted by the Center for American Women and Politics in 2001 and 1988.⁷

Gender Differences: A First Look

Upon initial examination, CAWP's data offer little evidence that gender differences have diminished or that women legislators

overall have become more conservative since the late 1980s. Just as they were in 1988, women legislators in 2001 are more liberal than men in their ideological orientations and attitudes on policy issues, and they show few signs of greater conservatism over time.

Table 1 shows that women state senators and state representatives were more likely than their male colleagues to self-identify as liberals and less likely to consider themselves conservatives.

The only sign of a shift in a more conservative direction is found among male representatives, who were more likely to identify as conservatives in 2001 than in 1988. Women representatives, in contrast, were equally as likely to call themselves conservatives

population of women state legislators changed far less dramatically, and the direction of the change was opposite to that for legislators overall. The population of women legislators was slightly less Republican (and thus more Democratic) in 2001 than in 1988. The proportion of Republicans among women decreased from 38.7 percent to 35.7 percent for state senators and from 41.4 percent to 39.7 percent for state representatives.

These underlying partisan shifts suggest that while the Republican Party has gained strength in state legislatures, Republican women have not shared equally in their party's success. Given the growth of Republican representation among legislators,

one would expect the proportion of Republicans among women legislators to have grown at a parallel rate. The fact that this has not happened is consistent with claims that the Republican Party has not been particularly hospitable, at least for some types of women, and points to the need for further analysis, controlling for party, to develop a more complete understanding of possible changes from 1988 to 2001 among women legislators and between women and men.

Party Differences in Gender Gaps

Among Democrats in both chambers, there were large gender gaps in political ideology in 2001. Female Democrats were much

more likely than male Democrats to call themselves liberals, somewhat less likely to consider themselves moderates, and notably less likely to identify themselves as conservatives. Almost half the Democratic women in state senates and two-fifths of the Democratic women in state houses, compared with only about one-fourth of their male colleagues, considered themselves liberals. The gender differences apparent among Democrats in 2001 are very similar to those found in 1988.

The pattern among Republican senators is similar to that for Democrats. A gender gap was apparent among Republican state senators, with Republican women notably more likely than Republican men to consider themselves moderates and less likely to call themselves conservatives.

However, among Republican state representatives, gender differences were much smaller, with Republican women just slightly more likely than Republican men to self-identify as moderates. These findings for Republican state representatives in 2001 stand in stark contrast to the findings for 1988, when gender differences in political ideology were moderately strong and significant for Republicans as well as Democrats in state houses. Thus, gender differences apparent among Republican representatives in CAWP's earlier study appear considerably diminished in 2001.

Table 1 Gender Differences in Proportions of State Legislators, 2002 and 1988, Who Self-Identified as Liberals, Moderates, and Conservatives

Ideology ¹	2001				1988			
	Senate		House		Senate		House	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Liberal	29.8	12.1	26.3	10.2	22.3	9.5	27.6	15.6
Moderate	51.4	49.0	47.7	41.7	52.7	48.9	47.3	46.5
Conservative	18.7	38.9	26.0	48.2	25.0	41.6	25.1	37.9
N=	208	149	354	295	188	137	395	340

¹ Legislators were asked: on most political issues, do you generally think of yourself as very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, or very liberal.

(and liberals) in 2001 as they were in 1988, and women senators were actually a little more likely to consider themselves liberals, and a little less likely to consider themselves conservatives, in 2001 than in 1988.

Clearly the gender gap is alive and well among state legislators in the early part of the 21st century. However, as will become apparent below, the partisan dynamics underlying the gender gap among legislators have changed considerably. The gender gap of the 1970s and 1980s was produced by differences between women and men within both parties, whereas the present-day gender gap is more the result of differences between women who are Democrats and men of both parties.

Partisan Shifts in Composition of Women Legislators

Although gender differences did not seem to diminish between 1988 and 2001 and women state legislators overall did not appear notably more conservative, this pattern of stability obscures significant partisan shifts that have taken place. These partisan shifts are highlighted in Table 2.

As noted earlier, the population of state legislators was much more Republican in 2001 than in the late 1980s. In stark contrast to this pattern for all legislators, the partisan composition of the

Table 2
Differences Over Time in Proportions of Republican Legislators

% of Legislators Who Were Republican	All Legislators				Women Legislators			
	Senate		House		Senate		House	
	2001	1988	2001	1988	2001	1988	2001	1988
	47.0	38.2	47.8	29.0	35.7	38.7	39.7	41.4

Sources: The Council of State Governments 1988; National Conference of State Legislatures 2002; Center for the American Woman and Politics 1988; Center for American Women and Politics 2001.

Moreover, the reduction in the gender gap among Republicans in state houses appears to be due to an increase in the numbers of conservatives among Republican women. While Republican men became slightly more conservative between 1988 and 2001, Republican women, especially in the house, were considerably more conservative in 2001 than in 1988. The proportion of Republican women representatives who self-identified as conservatives increased from 44.3 percent in 1988 to 61.1 percent in 2001. Meanwhile, the proportion of moderates among Republican women representatives declined from more than half to just over one-third.

Is increased conservatism among Republican women representatives in 2001 evident in their public policy attitudes as well as in their political ideology? The data presented above suggests an affirmative answer to this question.

Table 3 presents the proportions of Republican and Democratic women and men who gave conservative responses on the 10 public policy issues that were included in CAWP's 2001 survey. Consistent with the findings of previous research, gender gaps were evident on most, although not all, issues for Democrats in both state houses and senates in 2001. Democratic women in both houses were less likely than Democratic men to express conservative views on the issues of parental consent for abortions, overturning *Roe v. Wade*, gun control, affirmative action, civil unions for gays and prayer in public schools. Among state senators, Democratic women were also less likely than their male counterparts to express faith in the ability of the public sector to solve our economic problems although there was no comparable gender gap on this issue among Democrats in the state houses. Among state representatives, Democratic women were less likely than Democratic men to take conservative positions on the death penalty and hate crimes although there were no notable gender differences on these issues among Democratic state senators. Only on the issue of school vouchers, favored by few Democrats of either gender, was there no noteworthy gender gap among Democrats in either chamber.

The parties were quite divided on these 10 issues with Republicans of both genders more likely than Democrats of either gender to express conservative views. However, as was true for Democrats in both chambers, female and male Republican state senators also differed from one another in their opinions, with women less likely to express conservative viewpoints. Among Republicans in state senates, notable gender differences were apparent on all of the issues except for the economy, school vouchers and affirmative action.

Republicans in state houses stand out as distinctive from Republicans in state senates and Democrats in both chambers in that few gender differences were apparent. Only on the issues of the death penalty, gun control and school vouchers did Republican female state representatives express somewhat less conservative views than Republican male representatives. On the majority of issues, there was very little difference in the attitudes expressed by

Republican women and men representatives. Republican women were about as conservative in their views as Republican men.

This lack of a gender gap among Republican representatives was not evident in 1988. Although the data are not presented here, significant gender differences were found for Republican state representatives in 1988 on the economy, the death penalty and parental consent – the three issue items from the 2001 survey that were also included on the 1988 survey – as well as on several other issues included on CAWP's 1988 survey (e.g., nuclear power plants, the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion). Thus, the disappearance of the gender gap on most issues among Republicans in state houses is a new development since 1988.

Is the lack of gender difference in the public policy attitudes of Republican men and women in state houses in 2001 due to the fact that Republican women representatives serving in 2001 were more conservative in their views than those serving in 1988? The three issue items that were included in both the 1988 and 2001 surveys provide an opportunity to examine this question. Republican women representatives were not more likely to favor the death penalty in 2001 than they were in 1988, but neither were their male counterparts. In 2001, 67.0 percent of Republican women representatives expressed conservative views on capital punishment, compared to 69.1 percent in 1988. However, Republican women in state houses were more likely in 2001 than in 1988 to express faith in the ability of the private sector to solve our economic problems (89.3 percent compared to 74.0 percent), and they were much more likely to disagree that minors should be able to obtain abortions without parental consent (83.7 percent compared to 55.3 percent). While Republican men also became slightly more conservative on these two issues between 1988 and 2001, increases in conservative responses were greater for the women.

Discussion and Conclusion

In 2001 women legislators in the aggregate were more liberal (or less conservative) than their male counterparts in their ideological orientations and attitudes on policy issues just as they had been in the past. Although the gender gap in ideological orientations and policy attitudes so evident in pre-1990s research on legislators continues to exist in the post-1990s political environment, the partisan dynamics shaping that gap are different. In earlier decades the gender gap among state legislators was due to ideological and policy differences between women and men within the Republican as well as the Democratic Party; today's gender gap is due more to the dis-

**Table 3 Gender Differences in Proportions of Democratic and Republican State Legislators, 2001.
Expressing Conservative Positions on Major Policy Issues⁷**

Policy Issue	Senate				House			
	Democrats		Republicans		Democrats		Republicans	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Economy	24.6	39.7	87.5	88.5	35.2	34.2	89.3	90.0
Death Penalty	32.6	32.8	73.3	83.1	26.6	47.1	67.0	80.0
Parental Consent	17.0	45.5	72.8	85.7	30.5	54.7	83.7	82.1
Roe v. Wade	2.2	10.3	36.8	52.1	8.0	17.8	49.5	52.3
Gun Control	38.8	66.2	88.4	96.1	46.8	77.7	90.6	96.6
Hate Crimes	9.7	7.4	36.2	65.2	7.8	16.7	55.8	55.6
Affirmative Action	34.9	43.8	88.1	92.0	36.7	56.6	90.9	94.9
School Vouchers	3.6	5.7	53.1	55.5	7.7	10.2	62.0	71.2
Civil Unions for Gays	15.4	43.3	82.1	91.9	24.9	50.0	85.2	87.5
Prayer in Schools	19.0	32.3	66.7	70.0	24.8	39.5	76.6	72.1

N = 129-139 Democratic women senators; 60-70 Democratic men senators; 67-72 Republican women senators; 72-78 Republican men senators; 218-238 Democratic women representatives; 108-121 Democratic men representatives; 117-130 Republican women representatives; 168-181 Republican men representatives.

pitable to the views of moderate Republican women than in the past. As Republicans have made gains in state legislatures, Republican women have not kept pace, and moderates simply are not now present among the ranks of Republican women legislators in the proportions that they were in the late 1980s. Conservative Republican women have made gains, but their gains seem to have come at the expense of moderate Republican women.

Endnotes

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Bio

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impression of Californian – and American – politics as candidate-centered, my research finds numerous examples of organizations finding and grooming candidates for office, and other examples of unaffiliated politicians trying to buy their way into office and failing miserably. The Progressives who sought to drive parties out of the business of politics seem to have failed in the long run. Politics in this weak party state is sounding suspiciously party-centered.

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⁴ David R. Mayhew, *Placing Parties in American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 185-6.

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Bio

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legal during the first three months of pregnancy. They were also asked whether they would strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose the following legislative proposals: A law banning the possession of handguns except by the police and other authorized persons; A law that would provide harsher penalties for hate crimes; A law which would allow your state to give preferences in job hiring and school admission on the basis of race; A law giving parents government-funded school vouchers to pay for tuition at the public, private or religious school of their choice; A law that would allow gay and lesbian couples to legally form civil unions, giving them some of the legal rights of married couples; A constitutional amendment to permit prayer in the public schools.

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