

Representing Women:
Congresswomen's Perceptions of Their Representational Roles

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A considerable body of research has documented that women representatives at both state and national levels are more likely than their male colleagues to support feminist positions on so-called "women's issues," to actively promote legislation to improve women's status in society, and to focus their legislative attention on issues such as health care, the welfare of family and children, and education (e.g., Dodson and Carroll 1991; Carroll 1994; Thomas 1994; Tamerius 1995; Flammang 1997). For the most part, however, research has not explored the beliefs that undergird and ground women representatives' seemingly greater concern for and commitment to these issues.¹ This paper explores the perceptions of women members of Congress regarding women as a category and examines how these perceptions affect their sense of themselves as representatives.

Much of the literature on women serving in Congress and the state legislatures has been framed in terms of descriptive representation and its relationship to substantive representation.² Women representatives descriptively represent, or "stand for," women in the general population by virtue of their inclusion in the societal category called "women." However, most advocates who are concerned about increasing the numbers of women in office and most scholars who study the effects of increasing numbers are concerned about substantive representation as well. The underlying presumption is that increased descriptive representation will lead to increased substantive representation. Women representatives will not only "stand for" women, but also "act for" them.

This formulation, however, begs the question of the location of the women who will be represented by the woman officeholder. Is a woman representative presumed to "act for" only the women who live within the geographical district she represents, or is she expected to "act for" women outside her district as well?

In recent work Jane Mansbridge has drawn attention to a form of representation which she calls "surrogate representation" (Mansbridge 1998; Mansbridge 1999). Surrogate representation occurs when a representative represents the interests of voters beyond the boundaries of the representative's district. Because a surrogate representative does not reside in the voter's district, the voter cannot cast a vote for the surrogate representative. In a surrogate relationship, there is no accountability in an electoral sense. Rather, the relationship between the surrogate representative and the voter is usually based on a shared ideological perspective or group identity. As a result, surrogate representation can take place through descriptive representatives who share critical aspects of their identities with voters and see themselves as having common interests. As Mansbridge has explained:

Surrogate representatives do not have to be descriptive representatives. But it is in this surrogate process that descriptive representation often plays its most useful role, allowing representatives who are themselves members of a subordinate group to circumvent the strong barriers to communication between dominant and subordinate groups (1999, p. 642).

This concept of surrogate representation is potentially of great significance in considering how women representatives may be helping to transform the institution of Congress and its policy agenda. To the extent that women members of Congress see themselves and act as surrogate representatives for women outside the geographic boundaries of their districts, they bring something distinctive to their roles as representatives, something that most men do not bring.

This paper assesses the extent to which women members of Congress do, in fact, perceive themselves to be surrogate representatives for women who may live beyond the borders of their districts. It examines the question of whether women members of Congress feel a special responsibility to represent the interests of women within the institution and explores their ideas about the commonalities among women which could constitute the basis for surrogate representation.

Description of the Study

This paper utilizes data collected for a larger project, conducted by the Center for American Women and Politics, focusing on the impact of women members of Congress on various policy areas during the 103rd and 104th Congresses. The study was made possible by the generous support of the Charles H. Revson Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

This paper draws upon 77 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women members of Congress. The first round of interviews was conducted between June and October 1995 with 43 of the 54 women who had served in the 103rd Congress (39 Representatives, 4 Senators; 32 Democrats, 11 Republicans). The second round of interviewing took place between October 1997 and March 1998 with 34 of the 48 women who had served in the 104th Congress (32 Representatives, 2 Senators; 24 Democrats, 10 Republicans).

The interviews, which were mostly conducted in-person and ranged in length from about 15 minutes to more than an hour, were taped. Interviews with the Congresswomen were done "on the record" so that their names could be attached to quotes from their interviews.

Although the questions most critical for the analysis in this paper were asked of most of the women interviewed, they were not asked of every woman, nor were they asked in exactly the same way due to the fluid and flexible nature of our interview schedule and the often severe time constraints under which interviews were conducted. Consequently, the analysis in this paper is purely qualitative in nature.

Congresswomen's Perceived Responsibility to Represent Women

Jane Mansbridge has suggested:

In practice, it seems that legislators' feelings of responsibility for constituents outside their districts are considerably stronger when the legislature features few, or disproportionately few, representatives of the group in question.... The sense of surrogate responsibility is also particularly strong when the surrogate representative shares experiences with surrogate constituents in a way that a majority of the legislature does not (1988, p. 11).

Women are greatly underrepresented in Congress. Women hold only 65, or 12.1 percent, of the seats in the 106th Congress; women held even fewer seats in the 103rd and 104th Congresses (Center for American Woman and Politics, 2000). Moreover, the contemporary women's movement has widely popularized the notion that women share experiences, ranging from disproportionate child-rearing responsibilities to discrimination in the workplace, which are not shared by most men. As a result, consistent with Mansbridge's speculations, one might expect a sense of surrogate responsibility to be widespread among the women who serve in Congress.

Indeed, it is. Almost all the women we interviewed claimed to feel a special obligation to represent the interests of women within the institution of the Congress. For example, Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) articulated the extra responsibility she feels to be a surrogate representative:

There are still so few women in Congress.... So you really do have to represent much more than your own state although my state is huge. I've got over 30 million people. But women from all over the country really do follow what you do and rely on you to speak out for them on the issues of women's health care, reproductive choice, condition of families, domestic priorities, environment... equal pay for equal work.... I even had that in the House of Representatives, which was incredible because I just came from a small district. So it is a pretty big burden. And I remember when I came, Barbara Mikulski said, "Oh, my god, thank god, someone I can share this with," because she carried the load for so long as the only Democratic woman in the Senate (1995).

Similarly, Representative Eva Clayton (D-NC) explained:

... [I]t is inescapable that women will communicate with you in a more vivid way of their hopes for their lives.... And it doesn't limit itself to my district. I have women all over the state say, "You are my congresswoman...." They identify with my presence here. And that adds, I think, an extraordinary opportunity, but I think it also adds a worthy burden that one has to be responsive [to] and responsible for (1995).

Some of the Congresswomen talked, as Boxer did, about the need to represent women from all across the country. Others, like Clayton, focused on women in their states. Representative Louise Slaughter (D-NY) offered yet another perspective, discussing the obligations she felt to be a surrogate representative for women in congressional districts that were represented by men and/or were less progressive than her own:

I do feel an obligation to all women in the country. In many cases, they don't have us [women representatives]. A lot of women are probably represented by some man.... [O]ne of the most important things for me... is ... to make sure that all those women have equal opportunity and equal access to what we have.... So I think we have an obligation to those others who think that our districts are pretty progressive and far-reaching to make sure that the other women in the country aren't left behind (October 24, 1997).

Some women members described how the responsibility they feel to represent women affects the way they consider legislation and go about their business in Congress. Representative Nancy Johnson (R-CT) provided a particularly compelling and detailed account:

... Congress depends on lobbyists to come in and say to us, "If you do this, this is how it will affect the machine-tool industry." Or, "If you do this, this is how it will affect the recreational boating industry".... Well, women don't have a lobby.... [W]e need to integrate the perspective of women into the policy-making process, just like we have now successfully integrated the perspective of environmental preservation, the perspective of worker safety.... [W]henver something comes up, we automatically think, "Gee, how will this affect the environment? How will this affect the working people at the work site?" But we don't really think, "How is this going to affect women who work at home? Women in the workplace with home responsibilities? Women who are single parents?" And so I do feel a special responsibility to participate in the public-policy process in a way that assures that where something is going to affect women as well as men, that I think through: How will this affect women who are at home taking care of children who need to re-enter the workforce later on? How does this affect women who didn't get to go beyond high school because their family thought only boys should go to college, and now they're stuck? I know a lot more about the shape of women's lives and the pattern of women's lives, so I need to look and see: How will the public policy affect those patterns? And how will they help or hurt? (December 3, 1997).

Some of the women came to Congress with histories of advocacy on behalf of women. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC), who had been Chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in the Carter administration, is one such example. As she noted:

[B]y the time I got to Congress, my view on women and my feeling of responsibility for pressing forward their demands was very well formed... This was just another place, another forum, to act on them (August 24, 1995).

Women like Norton easily assumed the role of surrogate representative.

However, several other women explained that they did not come to Congress with the intent of serving as surrogate representatives of women. Rather, they became advocates for women while serving in Congress. In fact, their sense of responsibility vis-a-vis women often developed as a response to the neglect of women's interests within the institution. Representative Patsy Mink (D-HI), for example, recalled:

[W]hen I first came to Congress in 1965, I had a notion that my basic responsibility was to my constituents and my state. And gradually as I took my place here, I realized that I had a far greater role to play and that it extended far beyond just caring for the constituents needs — that I had to speak for all the women in America. And so it was not something that I came to Congress

understanding, but certainly it hit me very quickly after I arrived that we had a voice that was far more important in the Congress than just the voice as a representative from Hawaii (October 19, 1995).

Some of the veteran Congresswomen on the Republican side of the aisle offered similar descriptions of how they came, over time, to take on the responsibility of representing women's interests within the institution. Representative Marge Roukema (R-NJ) insisted that she "hadn't wanted to" take on women's and family issues. She had "fought it." Explaining that she had been "shocked to my toenails to realize... the indifference of the men in Congress and ... the callousness of them to some of these issues," she described her evolution as an advocate for women's interests:

When I first came to Congress, ... I really didn't want to be stereotyped as the woman legislator.... I wanted to deal with... things like banking and finance. But I learned very quickly that if the women like me in Congress were not going to attend to some of these family concerns, whether it was jobs or children or equity..., then they weren't going to be attended to. So I quickly shed those biases that I had, and said, "Well, nobody else is going to do it; I'm going to do it" (July 20, 1995).

It is not just the veteran Congresswomen who assumed the responsibility for representing women only after entering the institution. Some of the Congresswomen first elected in the 1990s offered similar narratives. For example, Representative Leslie Byrne (D-VA), who was elected in 1992, observed:

Most of us didn't come in as women's issue people, but what we have found when we got there is that if we didn't step in, those issues weren't addressed. I have always said that all issues are women's issues. But there are particular issues that affect women in greater proportions than others that don't seem to get the attention, and those are the ones you find yourself looking at just out of an issue of fairness (August 9, 1995).

With few exceptions, the commitment to representing women was widely shared by Congresswomen of different parties, ideologies, races and ethnicities, tenures in office, and institutional position. For the most part they talked about this responsibility in similar ways. However, women who were more senior and influential within the institution, especially those who had attained a position of leadership within their party, often saw an additional component to their responsibility to represent women—a responsibility to insure that other Congresswomen would become successful and effective institutional players so that the perspectives of women would be heard at all levels and locations within the institution.

Representative Barbara Kennelly (D-CT), for example, explained:

I've felt it was important for me to open doors here, and I have. And that takes a lot of time, as well you know. I haven't reached the top of leadership, but I have opened the doors for it. Others will reach the top (July 20, 1995).

Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) described her efforts to insure that the five new Democratic women senators entering the 103rd Congress would be able to have an immediate impact on the institution:

[W]hen the Democratic women came, I had a series of empowerment workshops for them on how to get started in the Senate, how to get committee assignments, and how they could move to be full partners in the Senate. And I took everything that I had learned in my first six years, and really condensed it into a series of memos and... then a workshop. Why do I say that was important? You know, in all of American history until the five Democratic women came, only 19 of us had served, less than a half a dozen in our own right. So I was determined as the dean of the Democratic women that the women, once they came, would be able to make their mark very quickly (July 20, 1995).

Just as some of the women who were more senior and influential talked in somewhat different ways than other women members about their responsibility to represent women, so too did women of color. Women of color were no less likely than white women to conceive of themselves as surrogate representatives for women, and there were strong similarities between women of color and white women in their perceptions of their responsibility to help women. However, some differences were also apparent. For example, some women of color expressed the inseparability of their identities as, and their responsibilities to, people of color and women. Senator Carol Moseley Braun (D-IL), for example, observed:

I jokingly use the old Popeye "I am what I am." And that means I'm an African American; I'm a female. Neither of those particular constituencies have traditionally had much of a voice here in the United States Senate and particularly with regard to policymaking and lawmaking. So to the extent that I bring those experiences to the mix, I think that not only does that help and enhance the effectiveness, the efficacy is the word, of women in our policymaking process, but it also helps the body as a whole (June 29, 1995).

Similarly, Representative Cynthia McKinney (D-GA) noted:

... I am an African American woman who has a certain set of life experiences that differentiate me from the typical male member of Congress. Therefore, I bring that to the institution, and the institution is changed and enhanced because of the difference I bring (October 29, 1997).

Several Democratic women of color also emphasized that they feel a particular responsibility to look out for the interests of poor and working class women. Representative Patsy Mink (D-HI) explained: I think basically that poor women are the ones that have no representation in Congress, other than women who feel a sense of commitment to represent their causes. So I think that it's the poor women who are left out in much of this debate—certainly the legal immigrant women, and legal immigrant children..., and to some extent elderly women who are also poor and on Medicaid (November 4, 1997).

Similarly, Representative Eva Clayton (D-NC) suggested:

... to the extent that African-American women would know more women who come from a disadvantaged community, or know of a different type of struggling woman, or heads of household, or women who are living on limited means, I think our voices would put those faces in debates.... It would not be just articulating about the middle-class woman who is struggling to go from college to graduate school, but a woman who is struggling from high school to college, or one who has no high school education at all (November 4, 1997).

Finally, a few of the women of color expressed the idea that their responsibility to represent women extended beyond the borders of the U.S. They had a more global view of their surrogate representative role. As Representative Nydia Velazquez (D-NY) explained:

I think that as American legislators, women in this body, we have a responsibility that goes beyond women in America, women in the United States. We have a responsibility to protect women elsewhere (July 25, 1995).

Representative Carrie Meek (D-FL) expressed a similar sense of responsibility to women beyond the borders of the United States:

I feel that a woman who is raped in Bosnia by the troops who were there, or a woman who is raped in Haiti by the coup members over there, a woman who has her genitalia mutilated in

certain African societies, that I am partially responsible for that, for some amelioration of that, if at all possible (October 31, 1997).

Finally, only a very small minority of women members of Congress did not explicitly acknowledge the responsibility to represent women as a component of how they viewed their representational roles. These Congresswomen seemed more focused on other dimensions of representation, but even for them considerations about women in the general population still sometimes entered into the picture. For example, Representative Helen Bentley (R-MD) explained:

Well, I felt a real responsibility for representing America, representing American industry, representing American jobs.... All economic issues are women's issues as well, and certainly if jobs are there and the economy is going well, there are jobs for women as well as for men. And if they're not, women will be the first ones cut out. So my whole strength throughout my years in Congress was on the issue of jobs, keeping jobs in this country, of fair trade (August 2, 1995).

Similarly, Representative Barbara Rose Collins (D-MI), who saw herself more as a surrogate representative for the working class, acknowledged:

... I felt my biggest responsibility was to represent the working class, whether they were in my district or not because they were the people who were the least represented in Congress.... I mean GM could afford million dollar lobbyists, right? But the people who worked at GM couldn't afford a lobbyist to look out for their interests. Sure, you had UAW, but they looked at the union interests. So... most of my emphasis was on... the people who form the bedrock, the foundation of America, who toiled ceaselessly in the vineyards, but yet were left out of most of the tax benefits. So those were the ones I made my top criteria. For women, I more or less used myself as a litmus test on how it would affect me, and that's when I would go to bat for women's issues such as with breast cancer. I mean, women's issues were almost like African American issues — you just automatically supported them without thinking about it... I didn't feel it was a responsibility; it was just more or less given that that would be a part of my agenda (February 18, 1998).

“The Ties That Bind”

Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) suggested:

I've always thought that there was probably more that women had in common, whether they're people from urban areas, inner cities, or suburban areas, or people who are from rural and farm districts.... There are what I call “the ties that bind” (June 30, 1995).

The obligation that most Congresswomen feel to act as surrogate representatives for women seems to be rooted in their beliefs that there are underlying commonalities, what DeLauro calls “ties that bind,” among women. Congresswomen were asked if they believed women in the general society had anything in common as a group. As was true when asked about whether they perceived a special responsibility to represent women, almost all of the Congresswomen agreed that there were commonalities. Most of the women in Congress, regardless of party or ideology or race or ethnicity, believe, as Rosa DeLauro does, that there are ties that bind women together across divisions of geography, philosophy, class, and color. In fact, many see multiple commonalities and were able to talk about them at length.

Women members of Congress described a wide range of qualities and experiences which they believe women share. The vast majority of these perceived commonalities can be roughly grouped into four categories: care-giving, shared life experiences, discrimination, and work style.

Perhaps the most frequently mentioned commonality had to do with women's roles as care-givers and nurturers. Representative Sue Kelly (R-NY) reflected a point of view common among the women members of Congress:

I think women bring a very different view to law making.... Women are the nurturing people in the nation. Women are the people who get called by their parents when there is a problem. Women are the people who get called by their kids when there is a problem. We are the people who do the nurturing and have to think: How do we fix this? (January 22, 1998).

Representative Marcy Kaptur (D-OH) gave another version of a care-giving response:

I think that women in general are more life-giving. And I remember reading a quote after the Vietnam War... — that men always believe that there is something worth dying for, and the difference is that women believe there is something worth living for. And I've thought about this a lot.... I think that women in society have not been able to achieve a point yet... where their desire to give life and to nurture living things is given precedence in the body politic. So I think that women can also be great peace givers, given the opportunity. I don't think that they are as predatory, at least I hope not (July 19, 1995).

Yet another example of this type of response was offered by Representative Carrie Meek (D-FL):

I think that we have an attunement, as a group, that men don't have. I think it's because of the role we have had all of our lives—the child-bearing role, the nurturing role—that we are more sensitive to social issues.... We get to the core of things. Our intuition for these kinds of things, in my opinion, is something that women just normally have, that deep, instinctive feeling (June 27, 1995).

Many of the women in Congress believed that women in society share other life experiences beyond their care-giving responsibilities. Representative Susan Molinari (R-NY) elaborated on what she saw as some of these other shared experiences, “From just a physical standpoint, the way we have to dress, what happens to our bodies, having a period, having a baby, walking through life under those circumstances, having to wear stockings every day, high heels at certain points—these are things that just bring women together” (1995). Representative Elizabeth Furse (D-OR) suggested that what women have in common is “a not-male experience.” She explained, “I don't know that you could point to one experience, but I think the fact that we are not male is a very important experience, given that so much that happens in this world is driven through a male perception”(July 24, 1995). And Representative Tillie Fowler (R-GA) pointed to “just growing up as a woman.” She explained:

You were in Girl Scouts or Brownies or Junior League or YWCA or whatever. There are organizations and activities that, as women, you have participated in or had life experiences in that were because you were a woman (June 28, 1995).

A number of women members of Congress also pointed to the experience of discrimination as a common bond shared by women. Representative Barbara Vucanovich (R-NV), for example, explained, “I think that they [women] all face some discrimination, or at least some problems advancing, whether it's in business or whether it's in the legislative situation just simply because it has been a man's world” (1995). Representative Karen English (D-AZ) also viewed the experience of discrimination as a common denominator:

They [women] have something in common in that they have been treated similarly for centuries, and the United States is no different. Without a voice or the opportunity to vote, their participation and their representation and their services are going to be different than men, and that puts us all in a similar category (September 15, 1995).

Representative Louise Slaughter (D-NY) echoed English's observation that women have “been treated as a category” and further noted, “We've always made less money, regardless of the fact that we went to the

same universities and got the same degrees” (October 24, 1997). Finally, Representative Nydia Velazquez (D-NY) talked about how the experience of discrimination was a bond which transcended race:

Every study that has been conducted in terms of women's achievement and gaining parity in every level of our lives—government, workplace, ... access to health care—we find out that there is common ground for all women to come together. We are facing, no matter our race, the same type of stigma, the same type of battles, that every single woman faces in this nation, no matter what race or color she is coming from (July 25, 1995).

Perhaps most surprising was the frequency with which women members of Congress pointed to aspects of women's work styles as a common bond. Numerous Congresswomen talked about women's approach to problem-solving, their interest in achieving consensus, their concern with details, and other work-style qualities as areas of commonality among women. Senator Olympia Snowe (R-ME), for example, described a number of qualities related to work style which she believes women have in common:

[W]omen are focused on outcomes, results, and getting the job done. Basically women don't spend a lot of time on periphery of a problem. They generally like to delve into it and achieve the results and figure out what's the best way to achieve that outcome.... I think women are just basically that way, whether they're working in community affairs or their own professions or being at home.... Another thing I think women pay attention to is... details. And another thing is always trying to do their very best.... I see that as a trait that is common among a lot of women (June 29, 1995).

Senator Blanche Lambert Lincoln (D-AR) also viewed women as having a common work style:

[W]omen are good at compromising. They have learned how to do that. They learn how to work as team members because they have had so many responsibilities in the past with children, with family budgets, with household duties and things like that. They knew that they couldn't get everything they had to do at the church done by themselves, so they had to form committees. So women are used to working on teams; they're used to working together. They're also used to working in terms of compromise, realizing that sometimes it's better to get a step ahead than just stay in the same place for 14 years (November 17, 1997)!

Similarly, Representative Sue Myrick (R-NC) expressed her belief that women “are more prone to try to find ways to work together, to bring people together. We do it with our kids, to get along with one another” (February 25, 1998). Several Congresswomen also noted that women are more likely than men to, in Representative Jan Meyers' (R-KS) words, “want to develop consensus more than fight it out” (September 14, 1995).

Complicating the Picture: The Forces That Divide

While the Congresswomen perceive several ties that bind women together, they also are acutely aware of the differences that separate women and drive them apart, particularly in the context of the legislative setting. Women in the general society are divided by such markers as class, race, party, and ideology, and these divisions play themselves out in the congressional setting as well. Several of the Congresswoman noted that although women, in their view, have much in common, they are not “monolithic.” They believe both that there are commonalities among women *and* that women also are often divided from one another.

Congresswomen's perceived responsibility to represent women is filtered through their other differences. Some of the major divisions among the Congresswomen seem to be along the lines of party, race and ethnicity, district, and ideology.³ Of these, district and ideology stood out in the interviews as

particularly likely to influence the degree to which, and the ways in which, the responsibility which Congresswomen feel to represent women is translated into behavior on public policy.⁴

First and foremost, every member of Congress has the responsibility to represent her or his district. Any member who does not do this well is likely to have a short tenure in office. Congresswomen were well aware that district considerations often lead women to favor different policies and to vote in different ways. As Representative Tillie Fowler (R-GA) explained:

... we are each individuals and we represent different districts.... And so since our districts are different, therefore we're going to have some different interests at times because of the differences in the districts we represent (June 28, 1995).

Many of the Congresswomen were fortunate to have a good match between their personal ideologies and the ideologies of their districts. Representative Jan Meyers (R-KS), for example, observed:

I was extremely fortunate in that I am very compatible with my district.... I didn't have to be looking over my shoulder all the time. I won with significant majorities, and I think it was because my district agreed with me on most things.... There was not a lot of tug and pull between my district and my conscience (November 18, 1997).

However, some women members, especially some of those from marginal districts, very clearly experienced a "tug and pull" between their own preferences and those of their district. Representative Karen Shephard (D-UT), a Democrat who served from 1992 to 1994 in a district previously and subsequently held by Republicans, explained:

I didn't take the same kind of leadership role on those [women's and social] issues when I was in Congress, because in my district here, which is a very conservative district, those are politically charged issues that... would have been harmful to me. So the way I did it there was by working in the Women's Caucus, by helping in every way I could, and whipping the bills and getting the votes and making the right votes. But my very good, close friend Lynn Woolsey, for example, got on the committee I would have sold my soul to be on—the Education and Labor Committee—because she cares, as I do, about those issues. But if I would have been on that committee, it would have been a political liability (August 8, 1995).

Similarly, Representative Karen Thurman (D-FL), who had a history of being pro-choice but opposed Medicaid funding for abortions because of district considerations, described the frustration of not being able to appease both the constituents of her fairly conservative district and the women's groups with whom she felt a kinship:

Medicaid funding for abortions is a difficult issue for me. And we got blasted by women's groups.... [T]here are times that I think people have to step back.... I mean,... who is my replacement going to be?... Give me a break here!... I think women's groups have to come further than where they are (June 20, 1995).

Thus, as both the Shepherd and Thurman examples illustrate, a Congresswoman's responsibility for representing her district can sometimes come into conflict with her own preferences for representing women's interests as she perceives them.

Although the 104th Congress was polarized along partisan lines, many of the women in Congress had worked together across party lines in the 103rd and previous Congresses and continued to do so on a more limited basis in the 104th. Perhaps as a result, Democratic women and moderate Republican women alike tended to see the major dividing line among women not as party, but rather as ideology. In particular, they saw the cohort of conservative freshmen elected in 1994 as ideological outliers. For example, Representative Cynthia McKinney (D-GA) observed of the cohort of women elected in 1994:

Some women are bad old girls who want to be good old boys, and that's a shame. Unfortunately,

what we've found is that gender isn't always the key. As a result of the new women who were elected on the Republican side, we discovered that we share very little in common because our outlooks are so different (October 29, 1997).

This sentiment was echoed, among others, by Representative Elizabeth Furse (D-OR):

I think many of them [women in the class of '94]... come from a much more right-wing, Christian viewpoint.... They are not feminists, and in fact, are proud not to be feminists. And I think if you eliminate the feminist experience or feminist understanding, you eliminate a lot of common ground.... [W]e.... know from the 104th Congress that just having females is not the answer to pushing the women's agenda, because [some of the new women]... are not there for women. They're there for a right-wing agenda (July 24, 1995).

Representative Deborah Pryce (R-OH), a moderate Republican first elected in 1992, characterized the ideological differences among women in a somewhat different manner:

I think that some women members feel that they... must play up the women's issues for the women's groups back home, for a constituency that really helped them get elected. And so perhaps they get known for those issues more than other things. But in this Congress, especially with this new pack of women, they only shy away from that type of thing, and they want to be known as representatives and not women representatives, and that all issues are their issues.... I'm in the middle. But I can see the two extremes pretty clearly (September 28, 1995).

Several of the women members saw abortion as the issue which produced some of the sharpest divisions among women on ideological grounds. When Representative Connie Morella (R-MD), a moderate Republican, was asked if she saw a difference between the ability of women to work together in the 103rd and 104th Congresses, she replied:

I see a difference, and I think it basically has to do with the abortion issue and the perception of the abortion issue as a divider because certainly women care about osteoporosis and women's health issues in general. They care about equity in the workplace. But the abortion issue has somehow clouded the thinking of some of the new women. They've seen this as sort of a barrier (June 22, 1995).

Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), a more conservative Republican, shared Morella's view that the abortion issue, in particular, sharply divided women ideologically:

I think that we [women in Congress] have a common bond. Unfortunately, we have not paid enough attention to what unites us, and we tend to dwell on what divides us, like abortion or funding for some controversial health programs. Those kinds of issues, as important as they may be to certain members, they are divisive. But there are a lot of issues that we could unite and rally around, and we just don't seem to pay enough attention to those family-type issues (July 18, 1995).

Ideological differences not only divide women in Congress, they also affect the way they perceive women's interests and thus the way in which the responsibility which Congresswomen feel to represent women is translated into behavior on public policy. For example, on the very divisive issue of abortion, Representative Barbara Vucanovich (R-NV) had the following to say:

I'm pro-life.... And yes, if there was an issue that dealt with that issue, yes, I felt like I should represent the women who felt that way (November 18, 1997).

While Vucanovich was interested in representing women on the abortion issue, her interpretation of

“representing women” on this issue was very different than, for example, the interpretation of fellow Republican Connie Morella, who is clearly pro-choice.

Similarly, Representative Nancy Johnson (R-CT) characterized the different interpretations she saw among Republicans and Democrats in representing women’s economic interests:

I think the Republican women feel a greater responsibility to attend to the issue of economic opportunity for women. Now the Democratic women tended to look at social services for women. That’s important, but if those social services end up disempowering women, then they are a... negative in their lives. You have not then done them a service; you’ve done them a disservice. The Republican women have been trying to turn that around — to look at service to women as a lever to empower them to fulfill their own potential (December 3, 1997).

As Johnson’s example illustrates, the ideological filters of Republican and Democratic women can lead them to very different conclusions about the best way to represent women’s interests.

Conclusions and Discussion

Congresswomen’s views about women and their representational responsibility vis-a-vis women are potentially significant for considering how the institution of Congress is changed by the presence of women among its members. A few exceptional male members of Congress may feel a special responsibility to represent women outside their districts, but for women this responsibility seems to be the norm, rather than the exception. Being a surrogate representative for women is, I suggest, part of what it means to be a woman member of Congress at this particular historical moment. When Congresswomen perceive of themselves and act as surrogate representatives for women outside the geographic boundaries of their districts, as they clearly often do, they bring something distinctive to their roles as representatives, something that most men do not bring.

Women members of Congress see several common bonds among women in the general population. In the eyes of Congresswomen, women in the population share the experiences of care-giving, gender-based discrimination, and the everyday occurrences of growing up and living as a woman in a male-dominated society. These shared experiences among women provide the women members with a set of gender-related interests and a sensitivity which they feel an obligation to consider and bring to bear in their work as Congresswomen.

Many women members also perceive that women have a work style that grows out of their gender-related experience and that differs from the dominant work style of men. To the extent that women members, as representatives of women, bring this perceived work style to their own work in Congress, they may, over time and as their numbers increase, help to bring about changes in the way business is conducted within the institution.

While most women members of Congress perceive of themselves as surrogate representatives for women and share some common perceptions about the shared experiences and ties that bind women together, they differ in the districts they represent, their ideologies, their partisan commitments, and their races and ethnicities. All of these differences, and perhaps other differences as well, can come into play and influence how Congresswomen translate their perceived responsibility to represent women’s interests into actual policy decisions. As a result, even when women members of Congress act in a way which they perceive as representing women, their actions may not always look the same. They may vote differently, offer different amendments, or favor different legislative solutions. Consequently, the change that results from Congresswomen’s surrogate representation of women’s interests will not always be unidirectional, straightforward, or uncomplicated.

Notes

1. An exception is the work of Beth Reingold although her work differs from mine in focusing on state legislators as their perceptions of women as a constituency within their districts (Reingold 2000; Reingold 1992).
2. For a theoretical discussion of descriptive and substantive representation, see Pitkin 1967.
3. The variables of party, race and ethnicity, district, and ideology are, of course, highly interrelated. Liberal women tend to be African Americans, non-Cuban Latinas, or white Democrats from liberal districts. Conservative women tend to be white Republicans elected from conservative districts.
4. The research staff who conducted the interviews with Congresswoman were white. Unfortunately, it is not possible to know whether this affected the degree to which possible racial differences were expressed.

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