

THE IMPACT OF WOMEN IN PUBLIC OFFICE

# THE IMPACT OF WOMEN IN PUBLIC OFFICE

*Findings at a Glance*

CENTER FOR THE AMERICAN WOMAN AND POLITICS

THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY  
**RUTGERS**

EAGLETON INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

**T**he political mood of the country in the early 1990s cries out for change. Disgruntled and disillusioned, many voters no longer want "politics as usual" or the usual politicians. They long for new faces and new ideas.

Women in politics symbolize change. The electorate views women as outsiders who might inject fresh perspectives or bring new life to the political process. Capitalizing on discontent among voters, women's campaigns frequently emphasize themes of change.

But do women in office really make a difference? Are they agents of change? Do they alter the course of public policy? Do they work to reform the political process? Or, once in office, do women lose interest in changing the system, accept the traditional ways of doing things and behave just like "one of the boys"?

The Center for the American Woman and Politics (CAWP), under a grant from the Charles H. Revson Foundation, conducted a major program of research aimed at answering these questions. The results of this research are reported in the series *The Impact of Women in Public Office*. This summary highlights selected findings from a portion of that project — a telephone survey of large, representative samples of women and men serving in state legislatures across the country conducted by CAWP in 1988.<sup>1</sup> Many of these findings are confirmed by eleven smaller-scale studies of women public officials at various levels of government conducted by individual scholars to whom CAWP awarded research grants.<sup>2</sup> The results of this program of research — the first systematic and comprehensive analysis of the impact of women in public office — provide strong evidence that women in office are making a difference in both public policy and the way that government operates.

The major findings from this research are:

**Women officeholders are reshaping the public policy agenda. When compared with their male colleagues in office:**

- **Women public officials have different policy priorities. Women are more likely to give priority to women's rights policies; they are also more likely to give priority to public policies related to women's traditional roles as caregivers in the family and society (see page 4).**
- **Women public officials are more active on women's rights legislation, whether or not it is their top priority (see page 5).**
- **Women public officials are more feminist and more liberal in their attitudes on major public policy issues (see page 6).**

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<sup>1</sup>See page eight for more detailed information about the methodology. Also see *The Impact of Women in Public Office: An Overview* for a more detailed summary of findings. The complete research results are reported in *Reshaping the Agenda: Women in State Legislatures*.

<sup>2</sup>For details of these reports, see summaries in *The Impact of Women in Public Office: An Overview*. The full reports are published in *Gender and Policymaking: Studies of Women in Office*.

**Some women officeholders are more active than others in reshaping the public policy agenda, but women of different parties, ideologies, ages, races and statuses within government institutions are having a distinctive impact. Our research shows:**

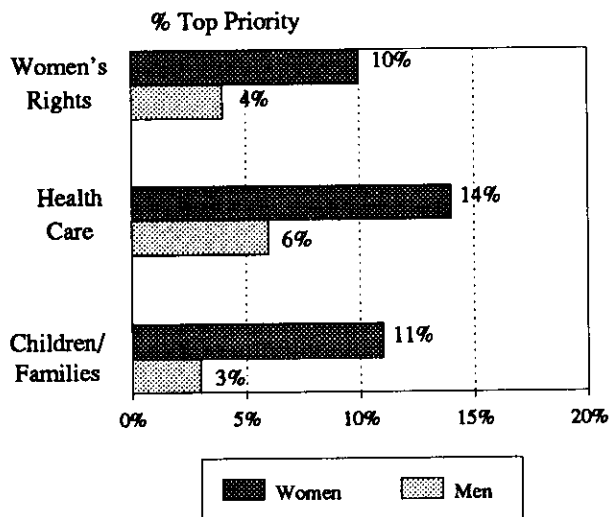
- **Democratic women are particularly active in reshaping the policy agenda, but Republican women are more active than men of either party.**
- **The officeholders most active in reshaping the policy agenda are feminist, liberal, younger and African-American women; however, non-feminist, conservative, older and white women officeholders are also actively reshaping the policy agenda.**
- **Women who have close ties to women's organizations are more likely than other women to be reshaping the policy agenda.**
- **When women move into leadership positions in governing institutions, their commitment to reshaping the policy agenda remains strong.**
- **Younger men, liberal men and men who call themselves feminists are joining women in reshaping the policy agenda.**

**Women officeholders are changing the way government works. When compared with their male colleagues:**

- **Women are more likely to bring citizens into the process (see page 7).**
- **Women are more likely to opt for government in public view rather than government behind closed doors (see page 7).**
- **Women are more responsive to groups previously denied full access to the policymaking process (see page 7).**

# Women and men public officials have different policy priorities

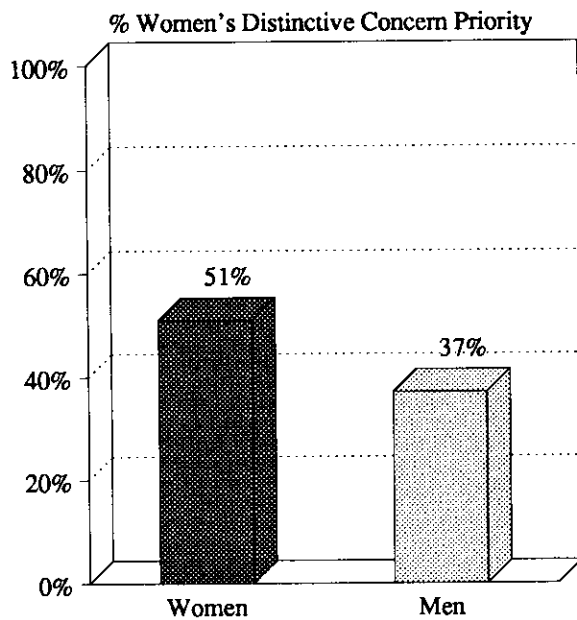
Issues Where Gender Differences in Priorities Were Greatest



CAWP's National Survey of State Legislators asked officeholders about their top legislative priority in the most recent session.

- Women were more likely to give top priority to women's rights policies.
- Women were more likely to give priority to public policies related to their traditional roles as caregivers in the family and society — e.g., policies dealing with children and families and health care.

Women's Distinctive Concern as Lawmaker's Top Legislative Priority



We defined *women's distinctive concerns* as a combination of both women's rights bills *and* bills dealing with women's traditional areas of interest such as health care, children and the family, education, environment, housing and the elderly. Women were notably more likely than men to have a bill focusing on *women's distinctive concerns* as their top priority.

*Over the years, with the increasing number of women [in public office]...we've seen a change...in women's issues, children's issues, health issues, aging issues, those kinds of things the male legislators really have passed over. They [men] have never had an interest.* (female legislator from the midwest)

# *Women public officials are more active than men on women's rights legislation, whether or not it is their top priority*

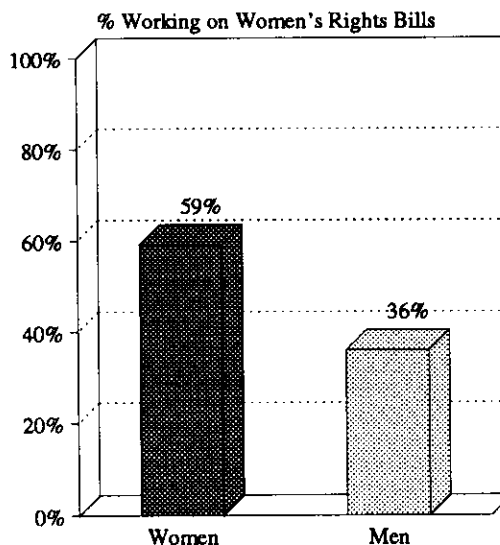
CAWP's National Survey of State Legislators found that:

- More women than men lawmakers had worked on some type of women's rights bill during the most recent session.
- This gender gap occurred among self-identified feminists *and* among those who did not call themselves feminists.

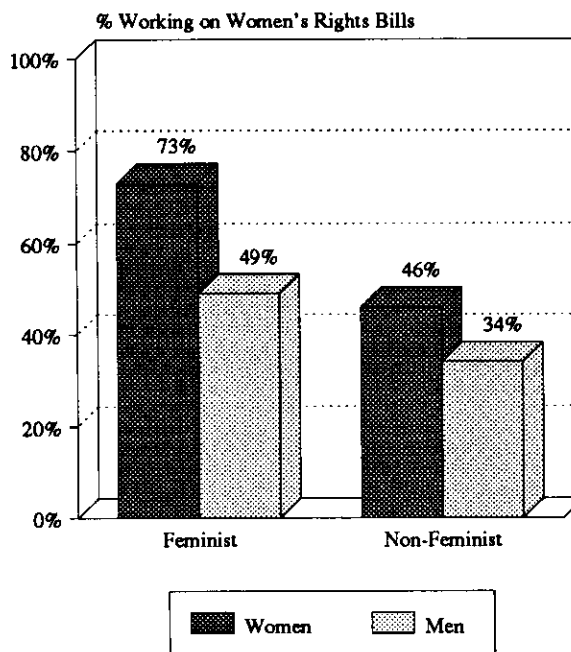
*They [men] were not tuned in to child care, spousal abuse, rape and all of that stuff. Here we [women] came along and said, "You know, these are your children, these are your mothers, your wives. If you are not going to take care of them, we are going to take care of them." (from discussion group of women legislators)*

*A week after I got in [office], I realized they were about to reverse a rape shield law.... We got it held up for ten days [and ultimately defeated the rape shield reversal]. Every woman in the state, including the secretaries and the wives, was screaming at the legislators.... If there is not a woman there to pay attention, it passes. (female legislator from a southern state)*

Female and Male Lawmakers' Work on Women's Rights Bills

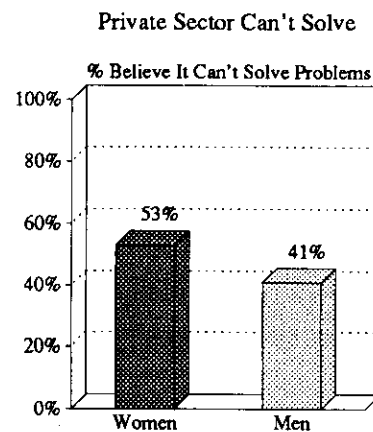
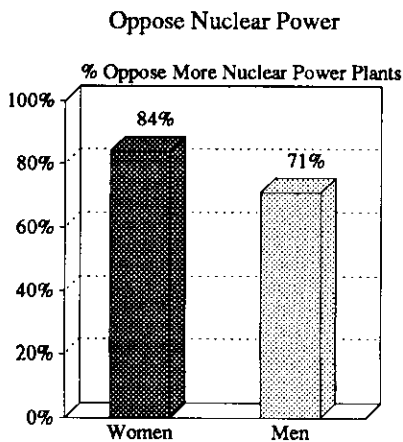
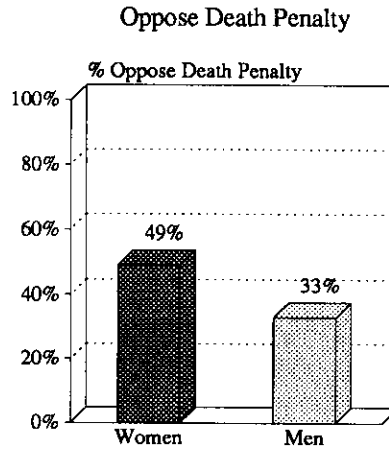
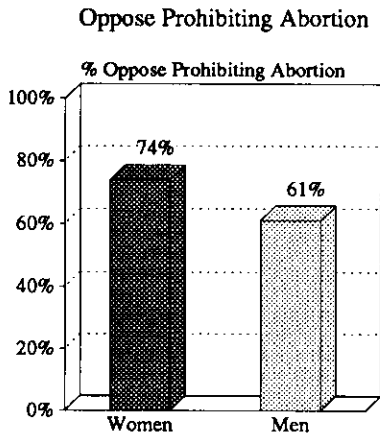
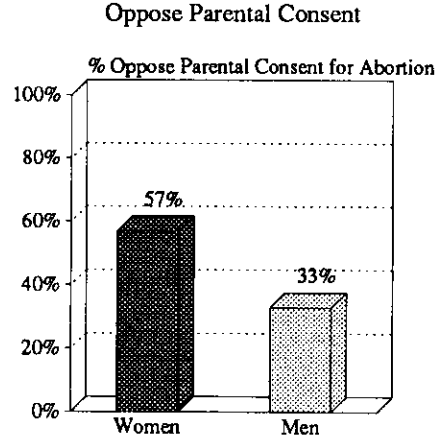
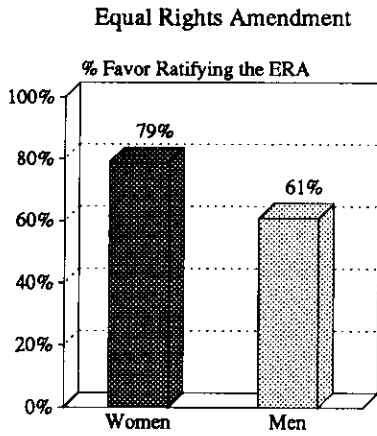


Work on Women's Rights Bills among Feminist and Non-Feminist Lawmakers



# *Women officeholders are more feminist and more liberal than men in their policy attitudes*

CAWP's National Survey of State Legislators found a gender gap in responses to six of eight policy questions asked of legislators; when there was a gender gap, women were consistently more likely to support a feminist or a liberal view. (See methodological note on page 8 for exact question wording.)



# Women officeholders are changing the way government works

Women public officials are more likely than men to bring citizens into the process.

- More women legislators reported that citizens were very helpful in working on their top priority bills.

*Women have more of a tie with our constituent base than men do because we work harder at...educating people in order to try to pull people into the process. (from discussion group of female legislators)*

Women are more likely to opt for government in public view rather than government behind closed doors.

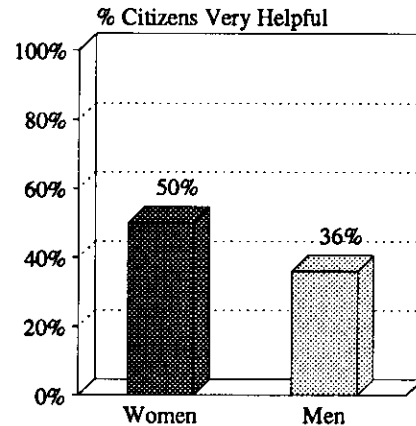
- A majority of women and a sizeable minority of men said women's increased presence had made a difference in the extent to which legislative business was conducted in public view rather than behind closed doors.

Women are more responsive to groups previously denied full access to the policymaking process.

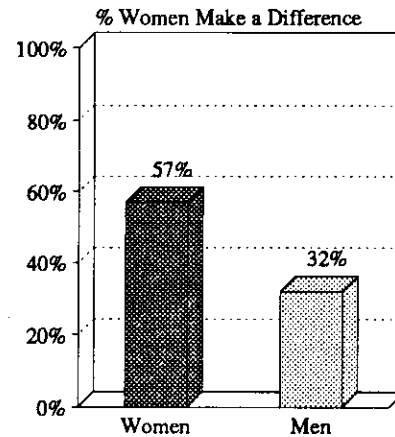
- Majorities of women and men agreed that women have made a difference in the access of the economically disadvantaged to the legislature.

*A female legislator takes more seriously the responsibilities to be sensitive to a broad range of constituent groups... and [has] a better ear and higher sensitivity for the needs of women, children and poor people. (female legislator from the midwest)*

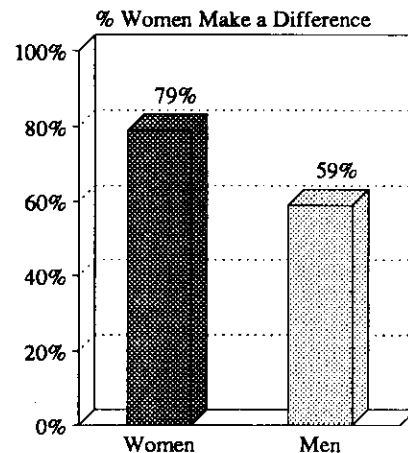
Legislators Citing Citizens as Very Helpful Sources of Support



Business Conducted in Public View



Access of Economically Disadvantaged



## *A methodological note*

During the summer of 1988, CAWP conducted a nationwide survey of state legislators. Four samples of legislators were drawn: (1) the population of all women state senators (n=228); (2) a systematic sample of one-half of women state representatives (n=474); (3) a systematic sample of male state senators (n=228); and (4) a systematic sample of male state representatives (n=474). The number of men sampled from each state house or senate was proportional to the number of women serving in that state chamber. This was to ensure that we actually compared women and men who served in similar political circumstances, rather than comparing women and men from states with very different political and legislative environments. A telephone interview of approximately one-half hour was attempted with each of the legislators, resulting in the following response rates: 86 percent for female senators; 87 percent for female representatives; 60 percent for male senators; and 73 percent for male representatives. Respondents and nonrespondents did not differ substantially from one another with regard to party affiliation, the one variable for which we have data for all lawmakers sampled.

To assess their views on policy, legislators were asked to agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat or disagree strongly with the following statements: If left alone, except for essential federal regulations, the private sector can find ways to solve our economic problems; the death penalty should be an option as a punishment for those who commit murder; government should provide child care services to all parents who need them, with fees charged according to ability to pay; to meet the future power needs of my state, more nuclear power plants should be built; minors should be able to obtain a legal abortion without parental consent; state and local taxes should be raised to help make up for some of the decrease in federal funding for social services; the Equal Rights Amendment should be passed by Congress and ratified by the states; I personally think abortion should be prohibited in all or most circumstances.

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### *Consult these reports for more details*

***Reshaping the Agenda: Women in State Legislatures (1991).*** This report examines policy views, actions, and perspectives on the legislative process to see whether and how women's increased presence in state legislatures has had an impact. Based on surveys of a national sample of state legislators, the research shows that women are making a difference, and that this difference is evident regardless of party, ideology, feminist identification, constituency ideology, seniority, age or political insider status. (122 pages)

***Gender and Policymaking: Studies of Women in Office (1991).*** This report is a collection of eleven essays written by scholars who received grants from CAWP to investigate the impact of elected and appointed women in local, state and national offices. (133 pages)

***The Impact of Women in Public Office: An Overview (1991).*** This report highlights and summarizes selected findings from CAWP's study of women state legislators and from the eleven CAWP-sponsored studies of women officeholders conducted by individual scholars. It provides information useful to a broad audience interested in women in politics. It should be of particular interest to women running for public office and those who are concerned about bringing more women into public office. (32 pages)

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Quantity/ Title	Price	Order Form
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