

# Women's policy issues in American politics: how women represent women

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*Though the number of women elected to the U.S. state legislatures has increased substantially in the last forty years, researchers still struggle to connect the presence of women in the legislature to public policy outcomes that affect women. One reason for this struggle is that we lack a complete understanding of how political parties modify the relationship between women legislators' interests in representing women and the creation of public policies that concern them. In **How Women Represent Women**, Tracy L. Osborn argues that political parties fundamentally shape the pursuit of women's policy issues in American politics. When women represent women, they do so as partisans. Reviewed by **Elizabeth Evans**.*

**How Women Represent Women: Political Parties, Gender and Representation in the State Legislatures. Tracy L. Osborn. Oxford University Press USA. March 2012.**

Women's rights have been at the forefront of recent US political debate; battles to safeguard abortion provision remain on-going, whilst [the use of the word 'vagina' during a floor debate](#) resulted in two Michigan state legislators being silenced by the House Speaker. Given that women remain numerically under-represented across state legislatures and at Congress, feminist scholars and political scientists should be concerned about how, where and under what conditions women's interests are represented. This is not to suggest that women's presence automatically leads to the representation of women's interests, indeed such an assumption would be essentialist at best and hopelessly simplistic at worst.

There already exists a wealth of feminist scholarship exploring the link between women's descriptive and substantive representation (see [Reingold, 2000](#); [Sanbonmatsu, 2002](#); [Wolbrecht, Beckwith and Baldez, 2008](#)). However, questions remain regarding how institutions such as political parties and legislatures (deliberative assemblies with the power to pass, amend, and repeal laws) might interact with gender to facilitate or constrain opportunities for women's interests to be articulated. Thus, Tracy Osborn's book fills an important gap in the scholarship by considering how party and legislative control might affect the representation of women's interests.

## HOW WOMEN REPRESENT WOMEN



POLITICAL PARTIES, GENDER,  
AND REPRESENTATION  
IN THE STATE LEGISLATURES

TRACY L. OSBORN

Osborn rightly notes that much of the current research exploring the representation of women's interests focusses on Congress, rather than at the level of individual states (p.6). In response to this lack of state level analysis, Osborn makes a strong case for paying more attention to state legislatures when exploring how, when and by whom the substantive representation of women's interests occurs. The book takes as its case study ten state legislatures, which provide a varied mix both in terms of geography, political composition and percentage of women members. The book uses aggregate data, specifically three datasets are employed: 1) the 1998 National Political Awareness Test (NPAT); 2) analysis of bill sponsorship during the 1999-2000 legislative sessions; and 3) roll call voting behaviour 1999-2000.

Analysis of NPAT survey data revealed that party was more important than gender in determining policy preferences prior to election, with Republican women voters closer to Republican men and Democratic women voters closer to Democratic men (p.87). As Osborn notes, specific women's issues, such as healthcare, are missing from the survey which limits its usefulness as means a by which to gauge opinion on a full range of women's issues.

Turning to bill sponsorship, Osborn finds that in seven of the ten legislatures women introduced 'significantly' more women's issues bills than men (p.104); moreover, Democratic women introduced more of this legislation than Republican women (p.106). One particularly interesting finding pertained to the extent to which Republican men were introducing explicitly anti-feminist pieces of legislation (p.110). Additionally, whilst Republican women were introducing fewer bills on specific women's issues, the bills they did introduce were similar in content to their male counterparts (p.111). As such, although women introduced more women's issues bills, party affected the direction of the representation with more traditionally feminist bills mainly introduced by Democratic women.

Finally, roll call data revealed that party overwhelmingly dictates voting behaviour; furthermore Osborn observes 'partisan women's voting on specific women's issues did not differ much from the voting patterns of their male co-partisans in most chambers' (p.145).

Osborn's overarching argument is that party matters: parties influence the approaches to women's issues and they influence the opportunities for agenda setting through control of the House. That parties and legislative context is important should not come as a surprise, however, her systematic analysis reinforces the importance of accounting for parties and legislative make up when studying the representation of women's interests. Reflecting upon the opportunities for scholars to spot how and when women representatives make a difference for women, she rightly distinguishes between agenda setting (bill sponsorship) and agenda response (roll call voting). This is an important distinction and the use of multi data-sets is a real strength of the book as is the thorough comparative analysis of the ten state legislatures.

My principle concern with the book is with its failure to address the broader conceptual framework;

I would have liked to have seen greater attention paid to some of the underlying normative assumptions underpinning this book which are dealt with all too briefly in the introductory chapter. For instance, although it is noted that representing feminist issues is complex, given the numbers of competing feminisms, this not an idea that is critically engaged with. Which types of feminism are more likely to be represented and by whom? Moreover, there is no consideration of the very real danger of sliding into essentialism, a significant risk with this type of research. This is not to suggest that the research is neither valid nor valuable, rather that some acknowledgement of the gendered assumptions at work here might have been useful. As would some recognition of the idea that men might represent women's interests. Finally, the book does require some knowledge of US politics and the specifics of state legislative politics.

Osborn's book is well written, important and original; it draws upon a good and varied range of data and makes a valuable contribution to understanding how and under what circumstances the representation of women's interest occurs. Specifically, her case study analysis forcefully demonstrates the importance for feminist scholars not to overlook the role that political parties and institutional make up can have upon the ways in which women's interests are represented. In conclusion, I would recommend Osborn's book to students and scholars of gender and politics and political scientists interested in exploring how institutions shape the dynamics of women's representation.

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