

Cindy Simon Rosenthal, ed. *Women Transforming Congress*. Forward by Richard F. Fenno, Jr. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002) pp. 453. \$29.95 ISBN 0806134550

Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, Barbara Boxer and Diane Feinstein: will one among them be the first female President of the United States? Political research will no doubt one day confront this event. In the meantime, the selections in *Women Transforming Congress* represent an excellent start to understanding the significance of gender in national politics. This important collaborative work confronts the important question of whether and how the 200 women who have served in the previous century have transformed the U.S. Congress as an institution.

Much of the existing research on women in politics has taken the form of individual case studies that defy broad generalizations. Editor Cindy Rosenthal's initial chapter takes note of four specific limitations of this research: it has been confined to state legislative experiences, since the available data are richest there; it focuses on women in office after the "feminist era" of the late '60s; it concentrates upon female elected officials to the neglect of the massive support staff surrounding legislative work; and it ignores the institutional norms and behaviors driving the actions of both men and women. Rosenthal and her collaborators endeavor to shift the research agenda to the national level despite her own admission that the data sample is small and conclusions necessarily tentative.

Published with assistance from the National Endowment for the Humanities, this work emerged out of the first-ever national research conference on women and the U.S. Congress, held at the Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center at the University of

Oklahoma in April 2000. The collection of individual works represents a broad foundation of research and analysis upon which future scholarship may build.

Story-like progressions of themes provide great breadth to this volume. The editor's initial chapter anticipates many later conclusions, allowing the reader to identify sections or topics of particular interest. Beginning with the gendered nature of institutional norms, the second chapter discusses the "gender ideology" affecting all members. The next section teaches that women represent far more than their individual constituencies. This is followed by an argument that while women's issues are championed predominately by female legislators, they do have a transforming effect upon their male counterparts. In one of the best contributions to the volume, female institutional support staffs are studied. It is noted that while female staff tend to concentrate on certain issue areas and contribute to the representation of issues and constituencies, they are by and large absent from most male-dominated committees.

The contributions on campaigns and elections focus on the experiences of "strategic politicians,"—those female candidates with the experience, skills and resources—who gain election only to find that they typically conform to institutional norms to succeed once elected rather than transforming the environment. The following chapter admits, however, that the electioneering of men has been impacted by women to the extent that they include "softer" presentation modes and female-oriented issues.

Another under-researched area addressed by this work is women and the committee structure. A good contribution to this subject is the essay which evaluates the effect of the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill episode. While this had a temporary effect in that more women gained increased representation on committees and subcommittees, the seniority of males largely prevailed to take command of the committee leadership structure and function in later years. The following essay seemingly reinforces the earlier "strategic politician" conclusion by considering female policy transformation. It finds that women who rise to leadership positions, albeit in female-friendly issues, can be successful, even as their achievements are overshadowed by the preponderance of "pivotal" committees with traditional male dominance. Little composite change has thus been noted overall in impact of gender at the committee level.

In establishing the congressional agenda and making policy, women have proven to be transforming, according to the contributions in the next section. An analysis of the introduction of legislation reveals that majority and minority party identification seem to determine to what extent risk-taking behavior occurs rather than simply whether congresswomen are driven by gender to assume the lead on gender-specific issues. The essay analyzing debate in the chambers from four specific floor debates in the 104th Congress again notes a broadening of the substance and approach to policy issues and concludes females have a tendency to speak out more on behalf of “underrepresented groups.” This adds credibility to the earlier conclusions that once elected, women represent far more than the constituency from which they came.

Interest groups and their roles are next. Gender-specific contributions in the breast cancer issue assisted the promotion policy initiatives regarding prostate cancer. Increased women’s involvement in issues through a “community” of interest groups reveals that the priorities of Congress soon followed. A particularly disturbing essay reveals, however, that protest and violence approaches, i.e., “tactics,” make women’s groups “targets” and not promoters.

This work finishes concludes with a series of essays identifying barriers to true transformation. Until more women are elected, gain seniority and ascend to more strategic committee and leadership positions, institutional norms will continue to limit their lasting contributions. Women running as Republicans on the ballot particularly encounter serious obstacles to change. Female responsibilities and lifestyle demands pose high hurdles for continuity and success and lead women to postpone political aspirations until later in life (while not particularly mentioned, this could also be a factor in the preference for state legislative service—closer to home). In a good global comparison, female parliament members in Great Britain are contrasted with their U.S. equivalents. Different institutional configurations make it far easier for female parliament members to succeed in the gender transformation of their institution than for U.S. congresswomen to do so.

Whether or not women’s impact upon national politics has indeed been transformative, this scholarly collection will certainly transform the study of Congress. Readers will gain new insights and perspectives on women in politics. Until the time that a “strategic” politician becomes

the first female president, this work should set the tone for how scholars approach the study of gender in our national political institutions.

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