

The Changing Face of Representation: The Gender of U.S. Senators and Constituent Communications.

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— Evelyn M. Simien, *University of Connecticut*

Whether candidates can mobilize voters through campaign Websites and press releases while combating gender stereotypes and providing more inclusive representation remains a pressing concern for scholars and strategists today. The potential for women to do so, as U.S. senators, is particularly intriguing and thought provoking, especially when considering that the United States is a democracy where women outnumber men yet identifies men as the normative political elite. In *The Changing Face of Representation*, Kim L. Fridkin and Patrick J. Kenney answer the following questions: Do male and female senators articulate different types of messages when governing and campaigning? Do reporters and editors cover male and female senators differently? Do citizens' understanding and assessments of senators vary with the senator's gender?

Scholars and activists have long debated the "role model effect," whereby women in elective office achieve high visibility on account of their uniqueness and increase the propensity for women voters to become mobilized—that is, to the degree in which they become more interested and actively engaged in politics. Concentrating as they do on the gender of U.S. senators and the impact of constituent communications on citizens' public opinion, Fridkin and Kenney make an important contribution to the extant literature. Using a multimethod approach that involves both content analysis of news stories and large-n survey research with a sample of 18,000 citizens, the authors consider whether the content of senators' official Websites and press releases, as well as political advertisements and local media coverage of senators, either mutually reinforce gender role expectations or contradict them.

Such a thorough and comprehensive analysis offers both surprising and predictable results, wherein male and female senators deliver different messages to their constituents based on perceptions of voters' gender stereotypes, and they are also treated differently in local newspapers. On the one hand, female senators attract fewer criticisms, receive more credit for favorable policy outcomes, and have more positive trait mentions in the press. On the other hand, they receive less coverage, are quoted less often, and are less likely to be mentioned in the headlines compared to male senators. At the same time, and no less importantly, male senators receive more substantive coverage of their preferred issues than do female senators. More specifically, the local press does not reinforce female senators' preferred choice of topics like health care and education when reporting on them.

An original theory, the strategic stereotype theory, is used to explain representational communications that vary by the senator's gender. Often, female senators will portray themselves as women who possess desired masculine traits and who do not conform to traditional gender stereotypes in order to maximize their chances of reelection. The assumption is that voters will stereotype them as typical women—warm, gentle, kind, and passive—but perceive their male opponents as typical men—tough, aggressive, and assertive. On the basis of experimental study after experimental study, we know that voters customarily penalize hypothetical female candidates who demonstrate female traits but who also lack masculine qualities when seeking higher national or executive office. Additional literature, however, suggests that women gain a strategic advantage when they run "as women" and stress issues that voters associate favorably with female candidates.

Taken together, gender-issue ownership and masculine posturing can prove to be a mixed blessing for female senators. They will adhere to gender-role expectations when it is deemed politically advantageous, but will try to revise stereotypical views when they are perceived as harmful to their career. One of the major downsides is that voter stereotypes about gender place certain strategic imperatives on women's campaigns. This is not to suggest that male senators are not similarly constrained on the basis of stereotypical traits that influence the presentation of self, but the local press is more likely to stay on message and *not* deviate from their preferred script when it comes to issue attention. While the gender of the senator significantly and consistently influences the content of both their preferred issue messages and local news coverage of male and female candidates, the fact that citizens are less likely to use gender as a voting heuristic when evaluating their senators running for reelection is an important finding.

Granted that the U.S. Senate is lacking in terms of racial and ethnic diversity, Fridkin and Kenney might have offered a more complicated and nuanced approach to the study of women in politics and constituents' opinion formation. They missed an opportunity to emphasize some of the interesting, often subtle differences that exist between and among women on account of partisanship and ideology. While they are more concerned with comparing women with men and less concerned with examining how different female senators communicate with their constituents, it would behoove women and politics scholars like themselves, as well as scholars of congressional politics, to take seriously the critiques of the category "women" to advance respective subfields. Research on women and politics in particular often fails to examine the plurality of differences between and among women in terms of Whiteness as it intersects with other axes of identity like gender and class. As U.S. senators, these women have more privileged statuses, and their social location can either mute or reify recognition of said

diversity in terms of differential positioning opposite their male colleagues. The heterogeneity of the group in question matters insofar as ideological differences help to discern constituents' opinions toward their senators. Whereas gender stereotypes only minimally affect the attitudes of their constituents (p. 156), ideological orientation could condition the effect of a representative's gender on voting during a reelection campaign and influence other variables of political interest for constituents across race and ethnicity.

Since legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw first spoke of intersectionality in the late 1980s, scholars from a host of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities have debated its relative strengths and weaknesses in theoretical, methodological, and policy terms. To be sure, the genesis of intersectionality research has allowed scholars to imagine other domains for which it might travel—namely, campaigns and elections. See, for example, *Sisters in the Statehouse: Black Women and Legislative Decision Making* (2014) by Nadia E. Brown and *Historic Firsts: How Symbolic Empowerment Changes U.S. Politics* (forthcoming, 2015) by Evelyn M. Simien. They have developed rigorous intersectional approaches that grapple with a wide range of questions. In so doing, they have transformed intersectionality research from its almost exclusive interest in “women of color studies” into a broader theoretical and methodological paradigm. Ange-Marie Hancock, for example, convincingly advocates uncoupling intersectionality and women of color studies in order to think through larger research questions with a new degree of complexity (“When Multiplication Doesn't Equal Quick Addition: Examining Intersectionality as a Research Paradigm,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 2007). She, along with others, emphasize the analytical value of intersectionality, even for scholars whose research agendas do not focus explicitly on women of color. The transformation of intersectionality research from women of color studies into a broader intellectual project is ambitious indeed.

By adopting such an analytical frame, Fridkin and Kenney might have advanced a richer, more nuanced theoretical argument and done so through in-depth comparative analyses of respective campaigns. Women senators are arguably the most visible class of female elected officials on account of their numeric size and influence in Congress. Representing almost half of the U.S. population, they offer an alternative image of political leadership and trump traditional beliefs (or gendered norms) about the appropriateness of elective office for women and girls. That said, the use of gender as an analytical category certainly enhanced the authors' examinations of the differences in male and female senators' representational messages in a way that illuminates, rather than obscures, the uniqueness of their campaigns. However, the use of race as an analytical category that intersects with gender and class would enhance their theoretical discussion

tremendously. Analyzing U.S. senators in terms of their racial identity is just as important as analyzing them in terms of their gender identity.

To write about political actors who are *both* advantaged *and* disadvantaged on account of their race and gender adds a certain level of analytical rigor and theoretical sophistication absent the analysis of Fridkin and Kenney. Such an examination lends itself to interrogating whiteness as the basis for privilege in U.S. politics—a status that provides certain social and economic advantages that male and female senators alike rely on for legitimating their campaigns. While male and female senators prioritize certain aspects of their gender identity similarly on the basis of perceived stereotypes, they still experience the electoral environment differently, as evidenced by the local news coverage afforded them. And so, an intersectional analysis is especially useful for broadening the discourse around the intersection of race and gender with female senators who have come to “stand for” women as universal subject. That said, Fridkin and Kenney could interrogate the category “women” in a more complicated and systematic way that denaturalizes invisible norms associated with both white privilege and maleness.

At the core of intersectionality research is the fundamental understanding that some categories of one's identity can embody power (whiteness/maleness) while other aspects render one less powerful (femaleness/blackness). Certain aspects of one's identity can be situated differently—that is, in conflicting positions within power hierarchies—and shift depending upon the context in which they are experienced both publicly and privately. The concept of intersectionality, generally, is particularly adept at making visible the complex nature of mutually constitutive identities. Race and gender figure prominently in its conception. Although subject to debate, there is no reason intersectionality research cannot involve such categories of difference and hierarchal relationships that are contextually situated in the U.S. Senate.

Fridkin and Kenney advance our practical and theoretical understanding of a single axis of identity—gender—and the role it plays in determining the content of constituent communications and the focus of local news coverage as it differs for male and female senators. Along the way, we learn that male and female senators are both strategic politicians who make tactical decisions about the presentation of self and also have preferred messages aimed at increasing their chances for electoral success. If this research reveals anything of theoretical importance, it is that gender stereotypes can influence representational strategies used by male and female senators in office and those running for reelection. It also shows the demand for new and improved work aimed at studying both *within* and *between* groups—especially, with regard to the U.S. Senate.