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Congresswomen and Committees: Exploring the Committee Assignments and Policy Impact of Women in the U.S. Congress

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“I’m no lady… I’m a member of Congress,” These were the words of Representative Mary T. Norton, a member of the 74th Congress as she spoke to a Congressman who tried to give her preferential treatment on account of her gender. (U.S. House of Representatives - Office of History and Preservation, 2006, p. 61). Norton’s statement is an example of the determination for fair and equal treatment held by women in the United States Congress. In comparing the committee assignments that women receive today to those granted in the past, the difference is striking. Once limited to committees addressing social and women’s issues, women are now present on every committee, including the more prestigious committees such as Ways and Means, Appropriations, Rules, and the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. Over time, Congresswomen’s roles have greatly changed and there is sufficient evidence that women “bring unique experiences and viewpoints to the policy debate and different issues to the national agenda” (Swers, 2002, p. 3). Very few studies focus on the policy effect of women in Congress and even fewer, if any, have considered the significance of women’s committee assignments.

In the early years, women were generally assigned to second tier committees, such as those relating to the Interior, Indian Affairs, and Women’s and Family concerns. Yet, there were exceptions to this and beginning with Mae Ella Nolan in 1922, some female members of Congress were able to push for and receive first tier assignments. However, these exceptions were rare. By focusing on those women who did achieve higher positions through the years, this paper will explore the reasons behind this situation. Some women who became members of Congress upon the deaths of their husbands received preferential treatment. However, this was not always the case and on the whole, widows seemed to have no better chance of receiving their late husband’s committee assignments than anyone else. Some did inherit committee assignments, especially as the years went on, but others did not. Alternately, a number of women were elected in their own right and several reached prestigious positions even as other women in the same Congress did not. Thus, did succeeding one’s husband make a difference in a woman’s prestige? Alternatively, did being elected solely on merit enable women to reach higher positions? It must be admitted that women serving in the period between 1917 and 1961 faced much more of a glass ceiling than those who came afterwards. However, a turning point began in 1962 that brought the role of women in Congress closer to what we know today. In exploring a large amount of data, this paper will examine the gradual changes in committee assignments given to women as well as their effect on policy. This paper posits that while historically a woman’s success in Congress depended on a combination of her merit, connections, personality, and the time in which she served, these factors are no longer the driving force behind her committee assignments.

Starting with Jeanette Rankin in the 65th Congress and also examining the 67th and 68th Congresses, this paper will discuss the first women in Congress and their contributions to committee work and policy. Additionally, the influential women of the 74th, 84th, and 94th Congresses and their committee assignments are considered. Finally, this paper will reflect upon the most recent Congress, the 112th, and the committee assignments of Congresswomen at present. Using recent data and an interview with Representative Jan Schakowsky, the current situation of women in Congress will be compared with that of the women of the past.

In 1916, the first woman was elected to Congress and she helped set the tone for the women who would follow her. Even before the passage of the nineteenth amendment, Republican Jeanette Rankin was elected by the state of Montana. In 1914, Montana became one of several states that granted women full suffrage. As a result, Rankin was able to campaign for Montana’s lone seat in the House of Representatives. The daughter of a wealthy rancher, Rankin earned a B.S. in Biology from the University of Montana and subsequently attended the University of Washington. As a feminist, suffragette, and pacifist, Rankin was a very vocal campaigner for women’s rights and believed Congressional corruption could be remedied by the election of women to the governing body. Throughout her life, she was a proponent of peace and believed in non-violent demonstration (Lopach, 2005, p. 202). During her 1916 campaign, Rankin was subjected to intense scrutiny by the media and the public and her election made international headlines.

Upon arriving at the Capitol in 1917, Rankin was assigned to the Public Lands and the Women’s Suffrage Committees. Neither committee was very prominent but she made the best of her situation. Her reception in a male dominated Congress was serene and she attempted to keep a low profile by sitting next to a very elderly Congressman on the House floor and bringing her mother to stay in Washington (Lopach, 2005, p.138). Speaking of her deportment in Congress, Rankin said, “I never worked any female stuff…. I think men are tired of being flirted with, and they knew I never flirted with them” (Lopach, 2005, 138). Rankin also rejected the idea of campaigning as soon as elected and focused instead on her own agenda of social reforms, rendering her even more a loner. In her term, she was able to initiate several reforms in mining and aid the women’s suffrage movement. Rankin created the Women’s Suffrage committee in Congress and helped to introduce the suffrage amendment in 1919 (Kaptur, 1996, p. 30). Yet, the United States entered World War I at the beginning of Rankin’s term and the war hindered much of the legislation she hoped to spearhead. Furthermore, her reaction to President Woodrow Wilson’s call for a declaration of war against Germany did not improve her chances of re-election. In the 1917 vote, Rankin was one of only fifty members of Congress to vote against the war. At the midnight roll call, a very emotional Rankin said, “I want to stand by my country but I cannot vote for war” (Lopach, 2005, p. 148). This decision alienated Rankin from some of her supporters, other suffragettes, and several members of Congress. Not surprisingly, Rankin’s independence and her calls for reform were not always viewed positively and by the end of her first term, it was clear that she would not win re-election. Although she briefly campaigned for a Senate seat, her bid was unsuccessful and when her term ended in 1919, she became a lobbyist. In 1940, Rankin was again elected to the House of Representatives. In 1941, just days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Jeanette Rankin again became a controversial figure as she cast the lone vote against Congress’ declaration of war against Japan and Germany.

In the years between 1919 and 1921, campaigns for women’s suffrage continued but no women were elected to the 66th Congress. Although women could vote in several states, no other serious female candidates appeared. However, the women’s movement led by Alice Paul grew more and more vocal and staged multiple protests. President Woodrow Wilson opposed the suffrage movement and for his first term, refused to consider reforms or a constitutional amendment. Several different amendment drafts were unsuccessful, including the Susan B. Anthony amendment which stated, “The rights of citizens of the United States shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex” and the Lucretia Mott amendment, “Men and Women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and in every place subject to its jurisdiction” (Josephson, 1974, p. 94). On multiple occasions, suffragettes picketed outside the White House and were arrested by the Washington police. In some cases the women were treated horribly and suffered abuses such as being chained to the bars of their cells, beatings, lengthened incarcerations, and forced feedings in response to hunger strikes (Josephson, 1974, p. 95). Alice Paul was declared insane and kept in a mental asylum. Eventually, amid a changing attitude among the general population, President Wilson changed his mind and encouraged the passage of the Susan B. Anthony amendment. After this, the amendment traveled through the House and the Senate and in June 1919, it was sent to the states for ratification.

On August 18, 1920, the nineteenth amendment was ratified by a two-thirds majority of states and women were universally able to vote in the United States. Many believed that women would immediately flood U.S. government positions; however, this did not occur. In the elections of 1920, only three women were elected to the House as members of the 67th Congress: Winifred S. Huck, Mae Ella Nolan, and Alice Mary Robertson. Like Jeanette Rankin, all three were members of the Republican Party. Huck was selected by special election to succeed her father, William E. Mason, after his death. In the same way, Nolan was specially elected to finish her husband’s term following his death in 1922. The committee assignments of the three women varied, though all were members of the committee on Women’s Suffrage. In addition to this, Huck was given Expenditures in the Department of Commerce and Reform in the Civil Service while Nolan received Expenditures in the Post Office Department and Labor; and Robertson was part of Expenditures in the Interior Department and Indian Affairs.

Of the three women, Nolan could be considered the most influential, as she would go on to serve as the only female member of the 68th Congress, serve on the Labor committee, and become the first female House committee chair in Expenditures in the Post Office Department. She also left her position on the Women’s Suffrage committee in order to focus on labor concerns. Labor was of especial interest to John I. Nolan when he was in Congress and Edna Mae Nolan said of her election platform, “I owe it to the memory of my husband to carry on his work” (U.S. House of Representatives - Office of the Clerk, 2012). Thus, it is clear that her husband’s connections assisted her in her committee assignments.

Concurrently, the first female Senator, Rebecca Latimer Felton, was appointed in 1922 and only served for one day. In the wake of Senator Thomas E. Watson’s death, Felton’s appointment to Congress by Georgia governor Thomas Hardwick was only a formality. Felton was a very vocal suffragette, as well as an outspoken white supremacist and former slaveholder, and her appointment was a gesture of goodwill toward female voters. This was especially necessary to secure the trust of female voters as Georgia had openly rejected the nineteenth amendment and even kept women from voting in the elections of 1920. As Congress was not in session at the time of Felton’s appointment, many assumed that she would not be sworn in as a Senator. A special election was held before Congress reconvened and Walter F. George was elected to fill the vacancy. However, after some pressure from Felton and women’s suffrage groups, George allowed Felton to be sworn in as the first female Senator. She officially served for one day before George took his position. Because of her short tenure, Felton received no committee assignments.

With the exception of Nolan and her assignment to the Labor committee, the policy effect of women in Congress during these first years is rather scattered. The committees handling Expenditures in the Department of Commerce, Reform in the Civil Service, Expenditures in the Post Office Department, Expenditures in the Interior Department, and Indian Affairs were not highly influential. In fact, the Indian Affairs committee eventually became one of the default places to assign female Congress members in the 1920s and 30s (U.S. House of Representatives - Office of History and Preservation, 2006, p. 66). Alice Mary Robertson was a known activist in Indian Affairs but was not able to achieve much in the committee. None of her proposals or legislation drafts made their way out of the committee and she ended up being very frustrated with her colleagues. In addition, Robertson erred in voting against an early pension plan for veterans of World War I and this action resulted in her losing any chance at a second term and being highly unpopular in her home district. In contrast, Winifred S. Huck did have some effect on policy as she carried on her father’s legacy, and pursued several interests of her own. For the most part, Huck’s committee involvement was not her primary focus and most of her best-remembered moments occurred outside of committee interests. As the first married Congresswoman, Huck also had four children and was interested in child labor laws and the rights of married women. She was also a very vocal anti-war advocate and helped to pave the way for the Kellogg-Briand Pact (U.S. House of Representatives - Office of the Clerk, 2012). From their lesser committee assignments and unpredictable impact, it is clear that the women of Congress still had a long way to go.

Looking ahead to the 74th Congress, which encompassed the years 1935 to 1937, it is obvious that some changes in committee assignments were occurring. Chiefly, Florence P. Kahn became the first woman appointed to the House Appropriations Committee, Mary T. Norton became the Chairwoman of the Labor committee, and Edith Nourse Rogers served in the Foreign Affairs committee. First elected to succeed her husband Julius Kahn in 1925, Republican Florence Kahn already knew much about Congressional business from aiding her husband for decades. Thus, from the outset, Florence Kahn considered herself an insider and received multiple influential committee assignments during her twelve years in Congress. Her first committee assignment in 1925 was the Indian Affairs committee and she quickly protested this assignment, saying, “The only Indians in my district are in front of cigar stores” (U.S. House of Representatives - Office of History and Preservation, 2006, p. 66). After this, she became the first woman assigned to Military Affairs, the committee that her husband had chaired during his time in office. In her time in Congress, Kahn supported the FBI, military preparedness, and worked against prohibition laws. As a well-respected member of Congress, Kahn showed the importance of women in politics as well as the impact that a wife can have in continuing her husband’s legacy. In 1939, Kahn said, “We can’t let the majority be so indifferent that we will be ruled by a minority. Women must be made to realize the importance of their voice” (U.S. House of Representatives - Office of History and Preservation, 2006, p. 68).

As she became a very prominent member of Congress, Democrat Mary T. Norton was appointed as the chairwoman of the committee overseeing the District of Columbia. This caused a male committee member to say, “This is the first time in my life I have been controlled by a woman” to which Norton said, “It’s the first time I’ve had the privilege of presiding over a body of men, and I rather like the prospect” (U.S. House of Representatives - Office of History and Preservation, 2006, p. 63). In 1937, Norton left this post to become the chair of the Labor committee. Under her guidance, several pieces of New Deal legislation were passed, including one outlawing child labor, and Norton used her position to fight for better wages for both the working class and female laborers. Norton served twelve terms in Congress and ultimately chaired four different committees. Her role in Congress was aided by her personality and determination, especially as she did not have the previous connections of Rogers or Kahn.

Republican Edith Nourse Rogers succeeded her husband upon his death in 1925 and served in Congress for thirty-five years. In the 74th Congress, Rogers served on the Foreign Affairs, Civil Service, and World War Veterans Legislation committees. She was a beloved figure on Capitol Hill, working eighteen hours a day, and called “the busiest woman on Capitol Hill” by the press (U.S. House of Representatives - Office of History and Preservation, 2006, p. 72). Remembered as one of the first political figures to denounce the Nazis’ racism, Rogers worked to pass legislation that helped Jewish children escape to the United States. Later in her career, Rogers chaired the Veterans Affairs committee, helped to open the U.S. military to women, and sponsored the GI Bill of Rights.

There were three other women in the House in the 74th Congress, Isabella S. Greenway, Virginia Ellis Jenckes, and Caroline O’Day, and though not as prominent as others, they did have some policy impact. A Democrat from Arizona, Greenway focused on the economic concerns of her statewide home district and was appointed to the Indian Affairs, Irrigation and Reclamation, and Public Lands Committees. These assignments were very important to her cause and she was able to procure more federal funding and relief for Arizona during the Great Depression. As a representative from a rural district in Indiana, Jenkes hoped to be appointed to the Agriculture or Rivers and Harbors Committees. Instead, she was appointed to Civil Service, District of Columbia, and Mines and Mining. Though disappointed, Jenkes continued to fight for her districts needs and eventually was able to secure funding to help develop flood protection along the Wabash River. In addition, she strongly advocated against prohibition, especially because grain farmers in her district needed more markets for their produce, and she was able to vote on measures that allowed the manufacture and sale of beer. The first female Democrat in Congress, Caroline O’Day of New York served on the Immigration and Naturalization committee as well as the committee for the Election of the President, Vice President, and Representatives in Congress. She is best remembered as a supporter of women and children’s labor rights as well as a pacifist who first opposed World War II and then changed her mind after learning about Nazi atrocities (U.S. House of Representatives - Office of the Clerk, 2012).

There were two female senators in the 74th Congress, Hattie Wyatt Caraway and Rose McConnell Long and both were specially elected to succeed their late husbands. A Republican from Arizona, Caraway was the first female senator to serve more than a day and also to be re-elected. In 1932, she was specially elected to take her husband’s place and then won the office in her own right at the end of the same year. She was appointed to the Commerce Enrolled Bills, Library, and Agriculture and Forestry committees and chaired the Enrolled Bills committee from 1933-1945. Her impact in Congress was strong and she was able to help her district on several occasions, especially with her presence on the Agriculture and Forestry committee. In contrast, Rose McConnell Long, a Democrat from Louisiana, was not a particularly prominent senator and only served briefly in Congress following the assassination of her husband. Long was appointed to her deceased husband’s committees: Claims, Immigration, Interoceanic Canals, Post Offices and Post Roads, and Public Lands and Surveys (U.S. House of Representatives - Office of the Clerk, 2012). Still, in her almost two years in Congress, Long enjoyed her committee work and even if she was very quiet and unobtrusive, she was also known as a very dedicated senator.

Moving forward twenty years, to 1955-57 and the 84th Congress, eighteen women were in the House of Representatives and one in the Senate. In the house, women served on the Agriculture, Banking and Currency, Foreign Affairs, Government Operations, Interior and Insular Affairs, Joint Committee on Immigration and National Policy, Post Office and Civil Service, Public Works, Veterans Affairs, Education and Labor, Merchant Marine and Fisheries, and Armed Services committees. Of these women, the most notable were Mary E. (Betty) Farrington, Martha Wright Griffiths, Coya Knutson, Katharine St. George, and Ruth Thompson. A Republican from Hawaii, Farrington was the first women to serve on the Agriculture committee. Betty Farrington was her husband, Joseph Farrington’s, closest confidante and advisor during his time in Congress and both of them were staunch advocates for the statehood of both Hawaii and Alaska. When Joseph Farrington died in office, Betty was one of the first choices to succeed him and won election by a high margin of votes. Inheriting her husband’s committee assignments, Farrington was appointed to the Armed Services, Agriculture, and Interior and Insular Affairs committees. Though she campaigned vigorously during her time in office, her petitions for Hawaii and Alaska’s statehood were ignored. Still, both were admitted to the Union in 1959, only three years after Farrington left Congress.

Democrat Martha Wright Griffiths of Michigan served on the committees on Banking and Commerce and Government Operations during the 84th Congress but in 1962, she became the first woman appointed to the Ways and Means committee. As late as 1961, Congresswomen were still lobbying Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn to appoint a woman to the Ways and Means committee and finally, Griffiths was appointed to the position. Rising to the position of Democratic Party Chair in Michigan, Griffiths’ husband was involved in politics as well and he encouraged Griffiths to run for office. Though she lost her first election for the House in 1952, she ran again in 1953 and the 84th Congress marked her first term. Considered the “mother” of the Equal Rights Amendment, Griffiths was a strong proponent of equality for women throughout her life and was responsible for the passage of many bills aiding women’s rights (U.S. House of Representatives - Office of the Clerk, 2012). She remained in the House for ten terms and afterwards, became the first woman elected to the position of Lieutenant Governor in Michigan.

Republican Coya Knutson of Minnesota was appointed to the Agriculture committee and was only the second woman to receive this position. However, in order to secure her selection, she wrote the Speaker of the House, Sam Rayburn, and the Majority Leader, John McCormack, as soon as she won the general election. The chairman of the Agriculture committee, Harold Cooley, did not want another woman to serve and it was only on the intervention of Sam Rayburn that Knutson received the appointment. Later, Cooley grew to respect Knutson’s work and admitted, “Frankly, I would not swap her for one-half dozen men” (U.S. House of Representatives - Office of History and Preservation, 2006, p. 366). During her time in Congress, Knutson made significant changes to Agricultural policy and education, as she helped to create federal student aid programs to enable underprivileged students to attend college. Unfortunately, Knutson’s Congressional career ended prematurely when her alcoholic and abusive husband grew jealous of her successes. Conspiring with the Minnesota Democratic Farmer Labor party that Coya Knutson had ignored during her first election campaign, Andy Knutson made his opposition to Coya’s reelection very public. He even released letters to the press that asked her to come home and publicized their marital problems. Coya Knutson handled the situation very well and though supported by many in Congress, she lost the general election in 1958.

Republican Katharine St. George was born into a political family as a cousin of Franklin Roosevelt and was first elected to the House in 1945. During the 84th Congress, she served on the Post Office and Civil Service committee and in 1961, in the 87th Congress; she became the first woman appointed to the Rules committee. As a senior member of the Republican Party, she also enjoyed prominent leadership positions within the party. Serving for eighteen years in total, St. George loved her role in Congress and also advanced ideals of equality for women. Though she did not consider herself a feminist and did not approve of the radical movement of the 1960’s, she believed that women were entitled to equality in the workforce, especially in wages and rights. In her time in Congress, St. George was able to encourage several policies that improved women’s rights and helped to lay the groundwork for the Equal Pay Act of 1963.

A judge and legislator from Michigan, Ruth Thompson was the first woman to serve on the House Judiciary committee and also served on the Joint Committee on Immigration and National Policy. Although she had previous judicial experience, her appointment to the Judiciary committee was protested at first. Still, she maintained her appointment for the rest of her career in Congress, particularly because she had a solid work ethic and interest in committee work. Thompson was also a strong proponent of reducing federal spending and was highly invested in peace efforts, even going so far as to propose the creation of a Department of Peace with a representative in the presidential cabinet.

The lone female senator in the 84th Congress was Margaret Chase Smith, a Republican from Maine. She is often considered a role model for women as she was the first woman to serve in both the House and the Senate and was considered for vice president. Her career in the House began in 1940. After her husband fell ill, he was unable to stay in Congress or run for office again, hence, he asked Margaret to run in his place. He said,“I know of no one else who has the full knowledge of my ideas and plans or is as well qualified as she is, to carry on these ideas or my unfinished work for the district” (U.S. House of Representatives - Office of History and Preservation, 2006). When she entered the House, she did not receive the committee assignments she wanted, particularly to the Labor committee. Although Mary T. Norton was the chair of the Labor committee in 1940, another member of the committee, Clare E. Hoffman, did not want “another woman” in the group (Sherman, 2000, p.48). Hence, Smith had to settle for lesser committee assignments on War Claims; Revision of the Laws; Invalid Pensions; and the Election of the President, Vice President, and Representatives in Congress. Later on, Smith was appointed to the prestigious Naval Affairs committee through her own strategy of asking to be appointed to Appropriations first. She said later,

“When I asked for a committee, I asked for Appropriations, knowing that I would not get it…. You didn’t expect to get what you asked for, so you would ask for something that was impossible… . And Naval Affairs was what I wanted; I didn’t want Appropriations … I think I was smart”(U.S. House of Representatives - Office of the Clerk, 2012).

In 1947, Smith became the first woman to be elected to the Senate, without being appointed or as a widow. At first, she served on the District of Columbia, Rules and Administration, and the Government Operations committees. However, in the 83rd Congress, Smith was the first woman to serve on the Appropriations and Armed Services committees, and still held a seat in Government Operations. Smith held these positions for the remainder of her time in Congress, only dropping Government Operations in order to serve on the Aeronautical and Space Sciences committee when the Space Race intensified. Almost as soon as Smith began her first term in the Senate, rumors began to circulate about Smith’s eligibility for the Presidency or Vice-Presidency. Although she denied them for several years, in 1964, she announced her plan to run for President. Though her bid was unsuccessful and she never gained the majority in any of the primaries, she was the first woman to be considered for the Presidential nomination by a major party. Smith is remembered for her dedication to Congress, her impact on Armed Forces legislation in both houses, and her 1950 speech on the floor of the senate against Senator Joseph McCarthy’s “political exploitation of fear, bigotry, ignorance and intolerance” (U.S. House of Representatives - Office of the Clerk, 2012).

The 94th Congress, spanning the years, 1975-1977, included nineteen female representatives who served on twenty-eight different committees, including Appropriations, Budget, Judiciary, House Administration, and Agriculture. However, the 94th Congress also included a point from 1973 to 1977 where no women served in the senate. In 1978, during the 95th Congress, three women were appointed to the senate to fill vacancies caused by death or resignation. Of the women in the 94th Congress, Leonor K. Sullivan, Martha Elizabeth Keys, Shirley Anita Chisholm, and Marjorie Sewell Holt were among the most influential. Democrat Leonor K. Sullivan was a mainstay in Congress and served for twelve terms until she retired in 1977. Told that she would not be able to win a special election after the death of her husband, Representative John B. Sullivan, she mounted her own campaign and won both the Democratic primary and the general election in 1952. Sullivan was the first woman from Missouri to serve in Congress and was never critically challenged in her re-elections. Though she started in second tier committees, Sullivan was an advocate for women and consumers from the start. In 1959, she co-authored the Food Stamp Act and helped to pass laws regulating the consumer credit industry. Also in 1961, Sullivan was part of the group of Congresswomen that urged Speaker Sam Rayburn to select Martha Wright Griffiths for the Joint Economic Committee, resulting in Griffith’s appointment. During the 94th Congress, she was the chair of the Merchant, Marine, and Fisheries committee, served on the prestigious Joint Committee on Defense Production, and also was the first woman appointed to the Democratic Steering Committee.

Martha Elizabeth Keys, a Democrat from Kansas, was only the second woman to be appointed to the Ways and Means committee after Martha Wright Griffiths. Joining Congress during a time of reform and in the wake of Watergate, Keys was appointed to Ways and Means as a freshman representative and she kept this appointment during both of her terms. A supporter of Title IX legislation, Keys helped to work out the details following the passage of the amendment in 1973. Ignoring the protests of male coaches and athletes, she worked with other Congresswomen to pass legislation supporting Title IX. In addition, Keys supported changes to the structure of social security that provided more equality between men and women, as well as protecting women’s entitlements in the case of divorce. Keys is also remembered for her personal life as she divorced her first husband in 1975 and married Congressman, Andrew Jacobs, Jr., in 1976. Keys and Jacobs met while serving on the Ways and Means committee and eventually, this development enabled her election opponent in 1978 to defeat her.

A Democrat from New York, Shirley Anita Chisholm was the first African-American woman to serve in the U.S. Congress and one of four to serve during the 94th Congress. First elected in 1969, Chisholm was an outspoken and charismatic Congresswoman who served for seven terms. Upon arriving in Washington, she was appointed to the Agriculture committee. As she was representing Brooklyn, she lobbied for a different assignment that would better represent her district and was quickly placed on the Veterans Affairs committee. In the 94th Congress, she was serving on the Labor and Education committee, an assignment that fit her background in as an educator and activist for family concerns. In 1977, she vacated this position in order to serve as the first African-American woman on the Rules committee.

During her fourteen years in Congress, Republican Marjorie Sewell Holt was a respected member of Congress and her party and a staunch supporter of fiscal responsibility. In the 94th Congress, Holt served on the House Administration and Armed services committees and in 1977, was appointed to the Budget committee. Campaigning for her first term, Holt promised to downsize the government and to cut federal spending. After she easily won, she actually attempted to do this and once on the Budget committee, she began the custom of the minority party presenting an alternate budget for review. Strongly conservative, Holt protected military spending and later served on the Joint Economic Committee during the 98th Congress. Though she did not identify as a feminist, Holt did believe that her gender coupled with her strong conservatism led to her being passed over for promotions within the Republican Party.

The 94th Congress marked the last time that women were not present in both the House and Senate; from the 95th Congress to the 112th, women have been present in both houses of Congress. Between 1978 and 1992, the number of women in Congress increased slowly but in 1992, fifty-five women were elected to the 103rd Congress, increasing from the thirty-four of the 102nd. In this so-called “Year of the Woman,” a record number of five women were elected to the Senate and twenty-four to the House. In addition, more women from minorities were elected in 1992 than ever before (U.S. House of Representatives - Office of the Clerk, 2012). The committee assignments of the 103rd Congress varied greatly and women were present on all of the major committees including Ways and Means, Appropriations, Armed Services, and Judiciary. Also in the 103rd, Nancy Pelosi became the second woman appointed to the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

The most recently concluded Congress, the 112th, included seventy-six women in the House of Representatives and seventeen in the Senate. In the House, Democrat and former Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, was the minority leader and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen was the chair of the Foreign Affairs committee. Additionally, eleven women chaired sub-committees of standing committees. For the Senate, Barbara Boxer chaired Environment and Public Works as well as the Permanent Select Ethics committee; Dianne Feinstein led the Select Intelligence committee and the Caucus on International Narcotics Control. In addition, Mary Landrieu chaired Small Business and Entrepreneurship; Patty Murray presided over the Veterans’ Affairs committee; and Deborah A. Stabenow headed Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry (U.S. House of Representatives - Office of the Clerk, 2012). Twelve female senators also chaired standing committee sub-committees. There are no longer certain committees to which women are assigned, a truth that Representative Janice Schakowsky acknowledged in an interview, saying,

I think that the leadership of Nancy Pelosi has changed perspectives about women members of Congress – both inside of and outside of the House of Representatives. We do need to get more women elected to Congress and make sure that they gain seniority so that they can chair key committees. (2012)

When elected in 1997, Schakowsky did not receive the committee she wished for at first and of this experience she said,

I wanted to be on the House Energy and Commerce Committee to work on health care and consumer protection, although I was extremely interested in my initial assignments: Financial Services and Small Business. I did make it onto the Energy and Commerce Committee though. Every committee I’ve served on – including the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and the Oversight Committee – have been interesting and have allowed me to represent the interests of my district. (2012)

Although the number of female committee chairs is impressive and reveals that women are much closer to equal representation in Congress, there is still much to improve. Representative Schakowsky expressed the belief that the trend toward equality in Congress is “certainly moving in the right direction” (2012). Further, Schakowsky confirmed that gender is no longer a major factor in committee assignments and said,

We have many strong women who have moved up the ranks in the House – Louise Slaughter on the Rules Committee, Nita Lowey and Rosa DeLauro on the Appropriations Committee, Maxine Waters and Carolyn Maloney on the Financial Services Committee and so on. The major problem, as I’ve said, is that we need more women to run for office. There is still a feeling that it is up to women to suspend their careers in order to care for their children -- which is one reason that women tend to serve fewer terms and which sometimes hurts with seniority. But that is certainly changing. (2012)

Women in the 112th Congress were present on nearly every committee and their effect on policy continues to become more apparent. Statistics show that the presence of women in Congress and on major committees does have an effect on policy. The inclusion of women in Congress does “influence the nature of the bills placed on the national agenda and the choices made about those bills” (Swers, 2002, p. 19). Feeling that female voters and their male colleagues expect it of them, women tend to take the forefront in women’s issues. Of course, Congresswomen vote differently depending on their party affiliation and sometimes Republican women tend to “downplay their commitment to women’s issues” in order to progress with other district concerns (Swers, 2002, p. 17). As noted by Representative Schakowsky, the need for more female representation is apparent and with the recent debates over reproductive rights, it has been a major topic of discussion. A 2012 *Newsweek* article pointed out that the low numbers of women’s representation betrays “America’s self-image as a world leader with enlightened values; the nation actually ranks 71st in female legislative representation, behind Bangladesh, Sudan and United Arab Emirates” (Bennetts, 2012, p.5). There are special advocacy groups that fund female candidates and attempt to balance the number of male and female Congress members. Yet, it is clear that these groups must continue to endeavor to produce change.

In the past ninety-five years, women have played a variety of roles in Congress including that of suffragette, successor, and challenger. On the whole, the full acceptance of women in Congress took a long time. In the early days, it is often apparent that women with previous connections, especially those who succeeded their husbands, were more likely to receive assignments to prominent committees while those without prior connections did not have this same chance. There were a few exceptions to this such as Mary T. Norton, Coya Knutson, and Ruth Thompson. Even so, women with connections and experience still had to prove themselves and had to fight much harder to receive work for which they were qualified. However, a clear turning point began in 1962 with the appointment of Martha Wright Griffiths to the Ways and Means Committee and continued to develop over the next ten or so years. Towards the end of Speaker Sam Rayburn’s term, women were given more respect and equal treatment. Gradually, the glass ceiling seemed to recede and more women without previous connections were able to receive the committee assignments that they wanted and deserved. There were likely many factors for this including the increasing feminist movement, the gradual advancement of a new generation, and over forty years of proof that women could succeed in Congress. The appointment of Nancy Pelosi to first the minority whip and minority leader positions and finally to the Speakership was a victory for women. Though there is still much work to be done, including simply encouraging more women to run for office, leadership goals seem much easier to reach. The next generation will be able to build off the foundations laid by those in the past and those currently in office. The presence of women in Congress does matter and it does affect the views of the next generation. A 2002 study found that “the more politics is infused with visible female role models, the more adolescent girls report an expectation of being involved in politics” (Campbell, 2006, p. 244). Statistically, women are involved in far less scandal than men, especially the liaisons that result in the resignation of male politicians. In addition, women work harder than their male counterparts and data shows that women “introduce more bills, participate more vigorously in key legislative debates and give more of the one-minute speeches that open each daily session. In 2005 and 2006, women averaged 14.9 one-minute speeches; men averaged 6.5” (Stolberg, 2011, p. WK1).

While discrimination is apparent from committee assignments that women received in the past, the situation of women in Congress is improving. Committee placements no longer depend on connections, circumstances, or intense lobbying. Though seniority still factors into allocations, gender is not considered the way that it was in the past. For the first forty some years of their presence in Congress, women had to work very hard to prove themselves and were often frustrated by the barriers their policies faced. In the early 1960s, things began to improve at a faster pace but it has only been since the 1990s that women have made tremendous gains in Congress. With women on nearly every committee, multiple female committee chairs, and Nancy Pelosi’s rise to the Speakership, the future appears bright. For nearly twenty years, young women have seen the effect of women in Congress and been able to consider public office themselves. The vibrant history of women in Congress is marked by disappointments and frustrations but also by accomplishment and success. Without the determination of women such as Jeanette Rankin, Mary T. Norton, Martha Wright Griffiths, Margaret Chase Smith, and Leanor K. Sullivan, the policies produced by Congress and even Congress itself, would look very different.

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