

The Hidden Influence of Women:
The Effect of Women Staffers on the Policy Priorities of U.S. Mayors.

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Abstract: Existing literature on the substantive representation of women suggests that the gender of an elected official affects his/her policy priorities, particularly concerning those policies that disproportionately affect women. However, due to the presence of term limits and professionalized staff, we suggest that there is an additional influence on the policy priorities of elected officials: the gender balance of their support staff. Using an original data set consisting of both gender composition of the staff and policy priorities of mayors in 38 cities in the U.S., we find evidence of an impact of the presence of women staffers on the policy goals of mayors. In addition, we offer interviews with both staff members and mayors that further substantiate our findings. Our results suggest that the gender of the mayor plays only a part in the story of the substantive representation of women; the presence of women staffers also plays a critically important role.

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Introduction

When Mayor Charlie Hales took office in Portland, Oregon in 2013, one of his first actions as mayor was to build a senior policy staff consisting of four men. Several months later, at his State of the City speech, he made his first public pronouncement of his policy priorities as mayor: balancing the budget, public safety, police reform, and gun control. As the year wore on the men on the policy staff resigned, and the responsibility of hiring replacements moved to the mayor's chief of staff. She filled the mayor's policy staff with three women and one man, which dramatically shifted the gender balance in the senior staff. After this change, Mayor Hales' agenda noticeably changed as well. In 2014 his State of the City address he identified his top priorities as balancing the budget, fixing streets and building sidewalks, and defeating a ballot measure that proposed creating an independent board to oversee the water and sewer bureaus. And by his 2015 State of the City address, his priorities had completely transformed from those outlined in 2013. In this speech he listed as his agenda as economic opportunity, livable neighborhoods, and police reform. As an Oregon Public Broadcasting reporter tweeted during his speech, "Charlie sounds more focused on social justice this year than he did last year."

The shift in Mayor Hales' priorities during his first two years in office was substantial and dramatic and, we argue, driven in part by the change in the gender balance of his senior policy staff. That is, we argue that the proportion of women on a mayor's senior staff impacts the type of policy he or she produces; when the staff consists of primarily women, the mayor is more likely to prioritize those policies typically classified as "feminine." When, however, the senior staff consists of primarily men, the

mayor is more likely to prioritize the “masculine” policy areas. We test our theory by offering an analysis of the effect of the mayors’ staff composition – i.e., the number of women senior policy directors – on the policy agendas identified in State of the City addresses of 38 of the most-populous cities in the United States. In addition, we offer the results of several interviews with mayors and chiefs of staff around the country. We find significant evidence that the substantive representation of women in American cities does not begin and end with the elected official. Instead, because of the influence of unelected staff on mayoral policy priorities, the descriptive representation of women in the staff of an elected official has a significant effect on the substantive representation of women.

Expectations for the Substantive Representation of Women

Existing literature suggests that the gender of an elected official is important for many reasons, not the least of which is the connection between gender and policy priorities. Schwindt-Bayer and Mischler (2005), for example, find that having more women in an elected body increases representatives’ responsiveness to women’s policy concerns. Their findings are supported by studies showing that within gender quota systems, which have higher levels of descriptive representation, women legislators introduce far more bills than male colleagues, and their bills are most often concerned with women’s issues (Kerevel & Atkeson 2013; Franceschet & Piscopo 2008; Swers 2002; Krook 2010; Krook 2006). While those facts could point to a conclusion that women are marginalized within legislators, relegated by their colleagues to their gender role, it also points to women’s high levels of competency with the power and resources available to them (Swers 2002; Eagly & Karau 2002). Swers (2002) notes that in U.S.

Congress, female legislators effectively represent women's issues at the committee level, where the bulk of the bill takes shape. For instance, female Republicans helped moderate conservative bills on abortion, welfare reform, and other issues traditionally associated with women, demonstrating that a female presence in the policymaking process helped create outcomes more beneficial for women (Swers 2002). Thus, although "standing for" may be sufficient, "acting for" remains critical for women's representation; while more women political representatives can change the perception of women, policy outcomes at the local, state and national level can change their lives (Pitkin 1967; Schwindt-Bayer & Mischler 2005; Dahlerup 1988; Morgan 2003).

Further, studies have consistently found that the substantive representation as a process – not simply an outcome – can have a positive impact on women's representation (Beckwith 2014; Kerevel & Atkeson 2013; Franceschet & Piscopo 2008; Swers 2002; Dahlerup 1988). Through the *process* of substantive representation, women representatives change the political agenda – which is important in having women's issues seen as relevant for the legislative body, but which doesn't necessarily result in policy (Franceschet & Piscopo 2008; Hacker 1951; Swers 2002). Only after women lawmakers pass legislation do they provide substantive representation as an *outcome* (Franceschet & Piscopo 2008). For instance, as previously noted, legislative bodies with more female representatives see those legislators introducing bills that focus on women's interests (Kerevel & Atkeson 2013; Franceschet & Piscopo 2008). While only a small percentage of those bills become law, the deliberative process raises awareness about women's issues among both male colleagues and the electorate.

Thus, it seems that, based on the findings of existing literature on the substantive representation of women, one should expect that – *ceteris paribus* – women mayors are more likely than male mayors to propose and produce policy that disproportionately impacts the lives of women citizens. However, while certainly true in some cases, this expectation overlooks the growing role of policy staff in shaping agendas and developing policy. As Maley (2000) describes: “[Policy] advisers cannot be viewed as peripheral actors in policymaking. The work of very active individuals located so close to decision-makers can have an effect on policy process and policy outcomes” (p. 468). Maley’s (2000) typology aptly classifies policy advisors’ role into five categories: helping to craft and set the elected’s agenda; linking ideas, interests and opportunities to best advance the agenda; mobilizing support for agenda items; bargaining on policy matters with fellow elected and other political actors; and delivering, which means bringing together all four elements — agenda-setting, linking, mobilizing, bargaining — to successfully advance agenda items.

Professionalized senior staff who play these five integral roles for an elected are a relatively new phenomenon (Eichbaum & Shaw 2010), perhaps explaining the lack of literature on how staff gender impacts elected’s agenda and policy outcomes. In Canada, for instance, policy staff in ministers’ offices grew from five in the 1940s, to 12 in the 1970s, to nearly 100 in the 1990s (Aucoin 2010). Eichbaum and Shaw (2010) argue that “the advent of political staff in executive government may be viewed as an institutional change designed to effect a movement along the continuum between,” on one end of the continuum, the ability of government officials to do their work expertly and without the influence of personal or party bias, and, on the other end of the continuum, political

policymaking influenced by electoral mandate (p. xxi). Thus, Eichbaum and Shaw argue that politics play a greater role in policymaking, requiring staffs of experts in both topic areas and political landscape to produce the best agenda and develop the best policy.

The institutional change is in part due to changing political culture. Fawcett and Gay (2010) identify three reasons for the change: “the professionalization of politics; a lack of confidence and trust in the permanent civil service; and the need to respond to a 24-hour media environment” (Fawcett & Gay 2010, p. 14). In this new environment, “the number and wide range of sources for policy advice have created an active marketplace for ideas in American politics” (Peters 2010, p. 157), professionalizing the role of policy staffer to balance the values of expert, unbiased work with political considerations (Peters 2010; Eichbaum & Shaw 2010). In this new, more demanding political environment, policy staff therefore play an integral role in both developing and advancing an elected official’s agenda.

The Conditional Impact of Women Senior Policy Staff

Because of the ever-increasing role of policy staff in determining the policy directions of elected officials, it seems appropriate to consider the impact of the preferences of the staff members on policy proposals and outcomes. We can, of course, assume that the general preferences of the staff align with those of the elected official, but the preference ordering or solution style could be reasonably expected to vary. For example, the mayor and the senior staff undoubtedly have very similar preferences surrounding major policy issues such as women’s health and climate change. However, while they agree on the general policy direction, a senior staff member may view one of

these issues as more important to address immediately, and could thus influence the mayor's prioritization of one policy over another. Alternatively, a senior staff member could impact policy in an even more nuanced fashion: perhaps the mayor and the staff agree that the crime rate is the most important issue to address, but a staff member encourages the mayor to consider a solution of increasing the community centers and drug-prevention programs in high-crime neighborhoods over that of increasing the number of police officers who patrol those neighborhoods. Thus, while the general policy direction is the same, the proposed solution – and thus policy outcome – is likely influenced by the independent beliefs of the senior policy staff.

We argue, therefore, that the gender balance of the senior policy staff matters. That is, it is not simply the gender of the elected official that impacts the substantive representation of women; thanks to the growing role and power of staff in today's political environment, the gender balance of the senior staff matters as well. Their role in agenda-setting, linking, mobilizing, bargaining, and delivering means that female policy advisors play a significant role in shaping policy priorities, and thus that their impact should be visible in the policy priorities of both male and female mayors. Thus, *Hypothesis 1* is as follows: As the number of women on the senior policy staff increases, the policy priorities of the mayor will become more "feminine."

In addition, we expect that the gender of the mayor will change the effect of the gender balance of the senior staff on policy priorities. That is, as we discuss above, existing literature on substantive representation suggests that women politicians are more likely to prioritize those policy issues that disproportionately affect women constituents. Thus, if the mayor is female, then she is more likely to already be pursuing a policy

agenda that includes feminine priorities; the effect of the proportion of women on the staff will therefore be muted. If, however, the mayor is male, then the effect of the proportion of women on senior staff should be stronger. He is less likely to already be prioritizing those policies that disproportionately affect women, and thus the presence of women on his senior staff will have a greater impact on cultivating feminine policy priorities. *Hypothesis 2* is thus as follows: If the mayor is female, the proportion of women senior policy staff will have a limited or absent effect on feminine policy prioritization. If the mayor is male, then the proportion of women staff members will affect the presence of feminine policy items on the agenda.

Testing and Analysis

To begin our analysis of mayoral policy priorities, we present the results of interviews with mayors and chiefs of staff in several cities in the United States. These interviews paint a vivid picture of the reality of establishing policy priorities in the mayor's office, and thus offer face validity of our findings. To determine our interviewees, we enlisted the assistance of the mayor's office of Portland, OR, and followed up with ten cities that were considered likely to respond to our request for interviews.¹ The ten cities were: Portland, Seattle, San Francisco, Baltimore, Houston, Minneapolis, New York City, Kansas City, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia. Of that list, we were able to interview either the mayor and/or chief of staff from five cities.

¹ A random selection of cities would undoubtedly have been a better selection mechanism. However, in a trial run we determined that mayoral offices were quite likely to ignore our interview requests if we didn't approach them with a connection of some kind. The Portland mayoral office provided that connection, which in turn made the other offices more responsive to the interview requests.

The interviews offered valuable insight into several of our research questions, but arguably their greatest value is that our results lend credence to a foundational assumption that we are unable to test using other methods. This paper rests on the assumption that staff members can impact the policy priorities of mayors; that is, we assume – based on substantial existing literature – that mayors are not unilaterally determining the policy direction of their administration. Our interview results offer strong support for this assumption; while there were some other areas of disagreement, all of our interviewees agreed that the senior policy staff do indeed wield substantial power in this regard. Seattle Mayor Ed Murray summed up the general opinion, saying:

A mayor, an executive, can give direction, but the development of that direction, and getting policy right as it impacts any given community or issue, is almost entirely dependent on the people you hire and the perspective they bring to it.

Gail Shibley, the former chief of staff for the Portland mayor, offered a similar view on the impact of staff on the policy agenda:

Staff have the opportunity, and maybe, therefore, the obligation, to flag, insist, demand attention on an issue that others on staff or the elected official may not be paying attention to. If this is done with motivation, intent, and skill to either improve policies or create policies for the good of the public, there's a tremendous opportunity for staff members to be powerful and effective.

Jason Elliot, the deputy chief of staff to San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee, offers further support for the substantial role of mayoral staff in policy development. He stated that the process of developing and debating prospective policy is “flat” rather than hierarchical, explaining that:

There's not a formal structure where the mayor gives us decrees and we've gone along, or where we have a

structured meeting where we've proposed to him ideas. It's very much fluid, we're a team, and just like any team, you know, there are people who are better at some things than other things, and it happens in all different which ways.

Based on these results, there is little doubt of the role of the staff in establishing policy priorities; the mayor is certainly the captain of the ship, but the staff play a substantial role in steering it.

In addition to our interviews, we gathered an original data set of mayoral staff and policy priorities from offices of 38 mayors of highly-populated cities in the United States. For each of these cities, we collected information on the gender of the mayors and their senior policy staff members (only those whose role include formulating policy; assistants and managers were not counted). In addition, we identified policy priorities through textual analyses of each of the mayors' State of the City speeches. State of the City speeches are high-profile, annual speeches, and are a formal power assigned solely to the mayor (Morgan & Watson 1992). They are an excellent gauge of both policy agenda and outcomes because, like the president's State of the Union address, elected officials and their offices make every effort not to announce policies they can't achieve; doing so in a high-stakes, priority-setting speech is politically costly (Edwards 2006; Morgan & Watson 1992).²

² City budgets are an alternative source for information on policy priorities, but we chose not to use them due to the lack of context for resource allocation that reflects mayors' priorities. For instance, during a nationwide uptick in gang violence in recent years, mayors across the country identified public safety as a top priority. But that priority was expressed in different ways. In Portland, Mayor Hales created the \$2 million Mayor's Community Centers Initiative, making community centers free for teenagers, thus removing a cost barrier for youth to access safe recreation in order to make it more difficult for gangs to recruit new members (Miller, 2015). While that initiative deliberately targeted gang violence, it was the Parks Bureau that saw a \$2 million boost rather than the Police Bureau. In Los Angeles, Mayor Eric Garcetti in his State of the City announced \$5.5 million for the Police Department's gang outreach program "so we

To determine whether policy agenda items announced in State of the City are masculine, feminine, or neutral, we categorized agenda items according to Krook and O'Brien's (2012) characterization scheme. Their technique factors in a) whether the topic is in the public or private sphere, and b) the topic's normative gender associations. The public sphere includes topics such as the economy and wage labor, "and have been historically associated with men," and the private sphere includes topics such as health care and education, and "have been linked closely to women" (Krook & O'Brien 2012, p. 844). "This double definition meant that the distinction was not simply about the public/private nature of the issues at hand, but also about what portfolios signified normatively in relation to traditional views on men's and women's roles" (Krook & O'Brien 2012, p. 844). The authors coded their data as masculine, feminine or, if it wasn't normatively linked to either sex, as neutral. Table 1 lists the topic categories.

- Table 1 about here -

We structure our regression analysis as follows: the dependent variable is the percentage of agenda items in each State of the City address that are feminine policy issues. For example, if the mayor offers four primary agenda items, and two of them are classified as feminine policy items, then the data point for that city would be 50%. Our primary independent variables are: first, the percentage of women on the senior policy staff at the time of the State of the City address and second, the gender of the mayor. In

can cover new territory and 50 percent more gang-related violent crime" (Garcetti, 2015). That investment was also focused on youth outreach to curb gang violence, but was reflected more conventionally in the Police Department budget. Because a line-item budget can't express these nuances that are critical in distinguishing traditionally masculine policy from traditionally feminine policy, the State of the City address — a formal mayoral power in which priorities are identified and explained — was determined to be the best method of identifying mayoral priorities.

addition, we offer several control variables to capture the effects of other factors that could also be impacting the proportion of feminine policy on the mayor's agenda. These include: the gender of the mayor's chief of staff, the percentage of college graduates in the city, the income per capita of city residents, and a measure of the mean policy preferences of citizens in the city (developed by Tausanovitch & Warshaw 2014). In addition, we include a dichomous variable to capture if the city is structured as a council-manager system. Mayors in the council-manager system have substantially less power than those in the mayor-council system, and thus forces external to the mayor's office, such as the city manager, could be influencing their policy agenda.

In an effort to examine the impact of the staff gender balance on the mayor's policy priorities, as well as if this effect is conditional upon the mayor's gender, we ran an OLS regression with robust standard errors. Two models are presented in Table 2: Model 1 is the regression without the interaction of mayor gender and staff gender balance. Model 2, however, includes the interaction term.

- Table 2 about here -

Model 1 demonstrates that the effect of the proportion of women on the mayor's senior policy staff does not, on its own, reach conventional levels of significance. But Model 2 reveals that the reason why the proportion of women fails to achieve significance in Model 1 is due to the differential effect of this variable. Because we cannot directly interpret the coefficient of an interaction terms (Kam & Franzese 2007), we present the results graphically in Figure 1.

-Figure 1 about here-

This graph illustrates the conditional impact of the percentage of female staff members on feminine policy prioritization. When the mayor is male, the proportion of female staff members matters; women on staff in this context have a significant, positive effect on the presence of feminine policy issues on the agenda. However, when the mayor is female, the proportion of women staff members does not matter; as is demonstrated by the inclusion of zero in the confidence interval, there is no statistically significant effect of women's presence on the senior policy staff when the mayor is female.

The results from our interviews with mayors and staff members lend further support to these findings. While it was common for both mayors and staff members to express hesitation about generalizing the policy priorities of male versus female staff members, almost all of them did express that there is a tendency for women to prioritize traditionally feminine policy areas. Mayor Charlie Hales of Portland explained that:

I certainly see some correlation between women and a focus on feminine or family oriented issues. Like sick leave, like child care, like sexual assault or domestic violence.

Seattle Mayor Ed Murray, while hesitant to generalize, agreed, saying that he “probably hears more consistently from my female staff about touching people who are marginalized... (they offer) a lot more sensitivity to reaching out in tragic situation, a lot more sensitivity.” Further, Mayor Murray was not hesitant to note the different policy priorities of male versus female legislators that he noticed during his 18 years in the state legislature:

If there was an issue related to early childhood development, issue related to healthcare, issue related to nutrition... I mean I could go on and on, it was almost always led by women. Issues related to human trafficking, sexual exploitation, almost entirely led by women.

The Chief of Staff for San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee, Steve Kawa, expressed a similar

view on the impact of staff characteristics on policy priorities:

Experiences of being a female in America, and being a male in America, are different, and we come to our workplaces with those differences. I'm a gay man, so I come with that. An African-American woman comes with different things and that's, I think, the joy of working in a place like the mayor's office, because we have a diverse staff and a wonderfully diverse city, and people do come to their work places with their different policy priorities.

Gail Shibley, former chief of staff for Portland Mayor Charlie Hales, explained that she views the impact of staff characteristics on policy agenda and outcomes as a bullseye: Each intersectional trait a person has — woman, gay, African-American, Muslim, etc. — removes him or her one ring from the conventional center of white, Christian, straight, upper-middle-class male. With each ring removed from that conventional center, Shibley said, the person adds that much perspective to policy development and outcomes:

Those who are farther out from the center tend to identify with and feel some companionship with others who are on an outer ring for a different reason; they share the fact that they're not part of the inner center. I find only male gender expression or only female gender expression less central to the analysis than the alchemy of components. If you are something other than the very middle of circle, you necessarily and wonderfully bring a different perspective and viewpoint. And the more diverse array of those differences you can bring to the operation of an office ... the better that office, staff, policy will be, because it will help improve the odds that it will work for everybody.

However, while almost all of our interviewees shared the general belief that men and women tend to have different policy priorities, Mayor Annise Parker from Houston — the only female mayor in our interview sample — broke away from this sentiment and stated that there is no difference in the type of policy proposed by male versus female staffers. She declared that: “I'm proud to say that I think the men who sit around my

conference table in the mornings with me are just as sensitive to diversity issues and to issues of things like child care or economic disparity as the women. I truly don't see a difference.” The unique response of Mayor Parker illustrates the conditional effect of women staff members; it is indeed the case that, in her office, women on the senior policy staff are not prioritizing feminine policy issues and, if they are, it is not impacting her agenda.

Conclusion

While the majority of items on mayoral policy agendas address issues that tend to be construed as masculine or neutral, our findings offer evidence that women on a male mayor's senior staff increase the presence of feminine policy issues on the mayoral agenda. It seems, therefore, that our understanding of substantive representation should be widened to include the impact of women staff, not just women elected officials. And, while there is understandable hesitation about endorsing the power of unelected in policy-making, there are several reasons why these results could be considered positive for women's advancement: First, there are more staff members than elected officials, which allows for more opportunities to integrate diverse views into an office. Second, because staff are appointed rather than elected, voter biases that sometimes keep under-represented people out of office (Eagly & Karau 2002; Aalberg & Jenssen 2007; Krook 2010; Valdini 2013) can be overcome to produce more representative policy. Third, staff positions are more accessible to women, who can be more reticent to run for office without substantial experience (Fox & Lawless 2004), or who have less of a chance at a successful run because they don't fit the traditional view of leadership (Eagly & Karau 2002). Thus, it seems that in addition to the critical role that women representatives play

in substantive representation, we should also be aware of the role of women staff members in guiding elected officials to address policy issues that disproportionately affect women.

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Table 1: Gendered Policy Areas: Classification Method

Policy Areas by Gender Type	
Masculine	
Agriculture, Food Safety, Fisheries & Livestock	Foreign Affairs
Communication & Information	Government/Interior/Home Affairs
Construction & Public Works	Industry & Commerce
Correctional Services/Police	Labor
Defense, Military & National/Public Security	Religious Affairs
Enterprise	Science & Technology
Finance & Economy	Transportation
Neutral	
Civil Service	Parliamentary Affairs
Displaced Persons & Expatriates	Public Works
Energy	Planning & Development
Environment & Natural Resources	Regional
Housing	Reform
Justice	Sports
Minority Affairs	Tourism
Feminine	
Aging/Elderly	Health & Social Welfare
Children & Family	Heritage
Culture	Women's Affairs
Education	Youth

Table 2: OLS Regression Model: Staff Gender Balance on Feminine Policy Priorities

Independent Variables	Model 1	Model 2
% Women Senior Policy Staff	.16* (.08)	.25*** (.08)
Gender of Mayor	-.07 (.06)	.16 (.13)
Interaction: % Women Staff & Mayor Gender		-.39** (.17)
Gender of Chief of Staff	.05 (.05)	.05 (.04)
Mayor-Council System	.08 (.06)	.11 (.06)
% of College Graduates in City	-1.19** (.59)	-1.33** (.57)
Per Capita Income of City Residents	.001*** (.001)	.001*** (.001)
Ideological Leaning of City	.13 (.12)	.16 (.11)
Constant	-.10	-.20
R ²	.3138	.3790
N = 38		

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*p ≤ .10, **p ≤ .05, *** p ≤ .01

Figure 1: Conditional Impact of Female Staff Members on Feminine Policy Agenda, by Mayoral Gender

