4-2017

A Woman's Place in the State House: Exploring Backlash Effects of Women's Increased Descriptive Representation

Emily S. Wasek

College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Part of the American Politics Commons, Gender and Sexuality Commons, Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Political Theory Commons, Public Policy Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation


https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/1122

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact wmpublish@wm.edu.
A Woman’s Place in the State House: Exploring Backlash Effects of Women’s Increased Descriptive Representation

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Government from The College of William and Mary

by

Emily Susan Wasek

Accepted for ___________________________________
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

________________________________________________________________________
Jaime Settle, Advisor

________________________________________________________________________
John McGlennon

________________________________________________________________________
Leisa Meyer

Williamsburg, VA
April 17, 2017
A Woman’s Place in the State House:
Exploring Backlash Effects of Women’s Increased Descriptive Representation

Emily Susan Wasek
Abstract

Historically, marginalized groups such as racial minorities, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and women have sought to obtain policy gains by increasing their descriptive representation through the election of officials with similar demographic qualities. Yet, this increased representation may also threaten dominant groups and result in negative responses such as a legislative backlash, wherein opposition legislators introduce proposals counterproductive to the marginalized group’s progress. While this “offensive” legislative backlash oftentimes occurs in response to the increased presence of Black and queer legislators, scholarship suggests such a backlash towards female legislators may adopt a more “defensive” form, wherein opponents block bills beneficial to women rather than propose bills counterproductive to their interests.

This study analyzes women’s issue bills in six state legislatures to explore whether women’s increased descriptive representation results in a legislative backlash and, if so, how such a backlash may occur. Increased female representation was hypothesized to result in a legislative backlash counterproductive to women’s interests. This backlash was hypothesized to primarily occur in a defensive form. Results suggest that increased female representation triggers a slight offensive backlash as well as a partisan form of a defensive backlash specific to legislative sessions where the Democratic Party has a majority.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................................. 4
INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................. 5
LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................................................. 7
  DESCRIPTIVE AND SUBSTANTIVE REPRESENTATION ........................................... 7
  BACKLASH THEORY ................................................................................................ 8
  BACKLASH THEORY SURROUNDING WOMEN ..................................................... 12
RESEARCH DESIGN ..................................................................................................... 14
  HYPOTHESES ............................................................................................................ 14
  PHASE ONE: OFFENSIVE BACKLASH RESPONSES ............................................. 15
    Case Selection ........................................................................................................ 17
    Dependent Variable .............................................................................................. 19
    Independent and Control Variables ..................................................................... 20
  PHASE TWO: DEFENSIVE BACKLASH RESPONSES ............................................. 22
    Dependent Variable .............................................................................................. 24
    Independent and Control Variables ..................................................................... 24
DATA ............................................................................................................................... 26
  OFFENSIVE BACKLASH RESULTS ..................................................................... 26
  DEFENSIVE BACKLASH RESULTS ...................................................................... 30
    Analyzing Partisan Dynamics ........................................................................... 41
    Discussion ............................................................................................................ 47
CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................... 48
REFERENCES ............................................................................................................... 52
APPENDIX A: STANDARDS FOR CODING BILLS ...................................................... 56
Acknowledgements

Working on this project has been a long and challenging experience that I could not have accomplished without the phenomenal support of countless individuals. Truly, one typed page of acknowledgements fails to fully encapsulate the depth of their contributions or the sincerity of my gratitude. Nevertheless, I will try my best here.

First, I would like to thank Professor Jaime Settle, who served not only as my advisor, but mentor and friend throughout this entire process. Working with Professor Settle has been one of the most rewarding academic experiences of my college career, and I have greatly appreciated her time and thoughtfulness. In addition, I would also like to thank the other members of my thesis committee, Professor John McGlenon and Professor Leisa Meyer. Professor McGlenon’s expertise was invaluable when examining the intricacies of state politics during the early stages of my research design, and Professor Meyer’s insight on gender dynamics was enormously helpful in establishing the theoretical core behind my project.

I also extend my gratitude to Professor Christopher Howard, who offered patient guidance during the case selection of my research, as well as Professor Paul Manna, who provided priceless instruction throughout the coding process of my project.

Finally, I would be amiss if I did not acknowledge the unwavering encouragement of my friends and family. Since day one of this project, they have been right beside me throughout this entire academic journey. A special thanks to my parents, Garret and Susan Wasek—I know that they probably are just as relieved as I am, if not more, to see this project to completion.
Introduction

Since the 1970s, the number of women serving in state legislatures has nearly quintupled from 344 women in 1971 to 1805 women as of 2016 (Center for American Women and Politics, 2016). This marked increase in the number of female legislators across the United States reflects not only a notable political, but cultural shift in traditional stereotypes surrounding gender and power that can carry deep implications for women’s progress, or the reduction of barriers to women’s equality (Cudd, 2012). While rising numbers of women in state legislatures may indicate important political gains for women, if men perceive these gains as losses and feel that traditional masculine power dynamics are being threatened, increased female representation may also translate into unintended negative backlash responses from men that ultimately to hinder women’s overall political advancement. As political scientist Grace Hall Saltzstein notes, “the answer to the question as to what difference it makes if women are elected to office not only must address what those women do in office, but also must address what others do in response or reaction to their presence” (qtd. Reingold 2008). Thus, although increased female representation in state legislatures may result in policies beneficial to women’s progress, such policies will lose their inherent value if every new policy that advances women’s interests is followed by a reactive action from men that undermines these same interests.

Within the literature, empirical studies have found that the increased presence of Black representatives in state legislatures has resulted in an increase in legislation counterproductive to the Black community, and the increased presence of queer legislators has resulted in an increase in legislation counterproductive to the LGBTQ+ community (Haider-Markel, 2010; Haider-Markel, 2007; Bratton, 2002). While past research suggests that an increase in female legislators might result in a similar legislative backlash contrary to women’s interests, previous work has
failed to find empirical evidence of a legislative backlash against women’s increased descriptive representation (Reingold, 2008; Haider-Markel, 2007; Kathlene, 1994; Maybee, 2008). My research seeks to fill that gap in the literature through a two-phase research project that explores whether women’s increased representation in state legislatures results in a legislative backlash that increases policy actions counterproductive to women’s interests. By advancing research about potential legislative backlash responses to women’s increased representation, I hope that political scientists and organizers alike will be able to better understand how historically underrepresented groups can best make policy gains while minimizing the risk of policy losses from a potentially hostile ruling majority.

In this paper, I will first review the literature that currently exists surrounding backlash responses to the increased representation of traditionally marginalized groups and how such literature relates to women. Next, I will present my hypotheses about the existence of a legislative backlash in response to women’s increased representation in state government. I will then explain the case selection process that went into choosing the six state legislative sessions I chose to analyze. Following this discussion of case selection, I will describe the data that I used to test my hypotheses as well as how such data was obtained before explaining my research design, which can be divided into two phases. The first phase of my research examines manifestations of a backlash that can be classified as “offensive responses,” wherein opponents actively propose bills harmful to women’s rights. The second phase examines manifestations of legislative backlash that can be classified as “defensive responses,” wherein opponents adopt an obstructive approach to women’s rights by blocking bills that are beneficial to women. Finally, from the results of my research design, I will assess the accuracy of my hypotheses, draw conclusions, and identify areas of future study.
Literature Review

Descriptive and Substantive Representation

Historically, activists within traditionally marginalized groups such as racial minorities, members of LGBTQ+ community, and women have sought to advance their political interests through descriptive representation, or the election of officials who possess similar demographic identities with a given constituent group (Haider-Markel, 2010; Preuhs, 2007; Bratton, 2002). By electing officials with shared backgrounds and experiences, members of underrepresented communities can gain multiple benefits. Increased descriptive representation may provide marginalized groups with role models who inspire higher levels of group political engagement, or foster higher levels of group confidence towards legislative bodies that have previously lacked the diversity necessary to understand a given group’s best political interests (Dovi, 2008).

However, the advantage most commonly attributed to increased descriptive representation is its resulting translation into substantive representation, or the favorable representation of a given group’s policy interests (Haider-Markel, 2007; Preuhs, 2007; Bratton, 2002). Although marginalized groups may also obtain policy gains with the help of sympathetic elected allies, descriptive representation has generally been viewed as the most reliable way to produce substantive representation (Haider-Markel, 2007). Through descriptive representation, underrepresented groups can compensate for institutional inequalities and combat traditional barriers to political recognition through the presence of a government representative who shares similar demographic or cultural characteristics (Dovi, 2008).

Within the context of racial politics, empirical studies have found that when Black politicians are elected to office, increased Black representation leads to increased policy benefits to the Black community (Haider-Markel, 2010; Haider-Markel, 2007; Bratton & Haynie, 1999).
Additional studies exploring the effects of Latino descriptive representation have found similar evidence that increased Latino descriptive representation creates comparable policy benefits for Latinos (Haider-Markel, 2010; Haider-Markel, 2007; Preuhs, 2007; Thomas, 1994). However, racial minorities are not the only historically marginalized groups who appear to benefit from electing officials who share in their distinctive identities. Research surrounding the influence of openly queer legislators has also found that as more LGBTQ+ candidates are elected to legislatures, the number of pro-LGBTQ+ bills that are introduced and adopted both increase (Haider-Markel, 2010; Haider-Markel, 2007).

Within this context, studies on women’s descriptive representation suggest that a greater female legislative presence produces a greater quantity and variety of policy proposals related to women (Haider-Markel, 2010; Haider-Markel, 2007; Bratton, 2002). Overall, research has found that female legislators are more likely than male legislators to serve on committees relevant to women’s issues, as well as draft, introduce, and advocate for legislation that addresses women’s concerns (Bratton & Haynie, 1999; Cammisa & Reingold, 2004). Furthermore, studies have shown that male and female legislators differ in their policy priorities, the interests they represent, and their conceptualization of issues, with these descriptive differences carrying significant policy implications (Rosenthal, 1997). Such trends suggest that, compared to male representatives, female representatives better articulate women’s priorities and perspectives through policies that more carefully take into account their effects on female constituents (Dovi, 2008).

*Backlash Theory*

Yet, despite the distinct benefits that increased descriptive representation can offer historically underrepresented groups, one must also consider the unintended consequences that
may result from these groups’ resulting political progress. The full impact of legislative diversity depends not only on how it affects members of traditionally marginalized groups who identify as non-White, queer, or female, but also its effect on members of traditionally dominant groups who identify as White, heterosexual, or male (Bratton, 2002). In any given society, there is always a status quo, which provides certain individuals with a greater capacity than others to enact their preferences or recognize their interests (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008). Thus, whenever groups disadvantaged by the status quo seek to reshape social structures in order to make political gains, it challenges the status quo and threatens the dominant groups’ institutional privileges (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008; Cudd, 2002).

As a result, dominant groups who feel a declining sense of importance may resist shifts in the status quo by using coercive power in an attempt to restore their perceived loss of control, and reverse progress made by previously disadvantaged groups (Bishin et. al, 2015; Post & Siegel, 2007; Cudd, 2002). Political scientists define this negative response to the social, economic, or political gains of traditionally marginalized groups as a backlash (Haider-Markel, 2010; Haider-Markel, 2007). The theory behind backlash politics was first developed during the Civil Rights Movement, when the term was used in reference to both the South’s violent resistance to Black progress, as evidenced by increased Ku Klux Klan membership among Southern Whites, as well as the “White ‘backlash’ in the North,” as evidenced by White supremacist George Wallace’s high polling numbers among Northern Whites during the 1964 presidential primaries (Post & Siegel, 2007).

In many cases, a political backlash may result in traditionally marginalized groups regressing, rather than progressing from the place of inequality where they initially started under the status quo. Theories surrounding political backlash vary in both the roles that they ascribe
different actors within a given society, such as masses versus elites, as well as the many ways that a political backlash can manifest itself, such as negative public opinion or political movements in the form of countermobilization (Bishin et. al, 2015; Price & Keck, 2015; Mansbridge & Shames, 2008; Post & Siegel, 2007). Generally, the literature has focused on backlash in relation to the court system, and purports that the majority of political backlashes are provoked by major judicial decisions that outpace public opinion on issues of social reform (Price & Keck, 2015; Keck, 2009; Post & Siegel, 2007). Legal scholars most commonly cite the Supreme Court as a major instigator of such backlashes, arguing that the Court’s decision to desegregate schools in *Brown v. Board* exacerbated the era’s Southern segregationist policies, and that its later decision to legalize abortion in *Roe v. Wade* inspired the “right-to-life” movement that led many legislators to enact policies restricting women’s access to contraceptives and abortions (Price & Keck, 2015; Keck, 2009; Post & Siegel, 2007).

These legal scholars attribute the backlash resulting from these court cases to not only shifts in the status quo that derived from court rulings, but also concerns about the institutional mechanisms through which these changes were enacted. A common argument within this literature is that if Civil Rights and Women’s Rights activists had sought progress through more politically responsive institutions such as legislatures, then their policy victories would have been better insulated from opposition (Price & Keck, 2009; Post & Siegel, 2007). In theory, whereas courts respond to “agendas set by litigants” and make decisions in a way that may be seen as “anti-majoritarian,” legislatures govern through a process of democratic negotiation that operates under a majority rule (Price & Keck, 2015; Post & Siegel, 2007). According to this logic, legislatures thus function in ways that are less likely to provoke large political backlashes, and allow historically underrepresented groups to make policy gains in ways that the general
public is likely to perceive as “more legitimate” (Price & Keck, 2009; Post & Siegel, 2007). As a result, such arguments have been used to support claims that the best way for traditionally marginalized groups to achieve substantive representation is through descriptive representation in legislative bodies.

Yet, contemporary scholarship has challenged the notion that progress produced by legislatures are better equipped than the courts to protect traditionally marginalized groups from political backlash. A number of studies have found little evidence to support claims that legislative policies are more acceptable to opponents than judicially enacted ones, and further scholarship suggests that any actor or action that saliently challenges the status quo may cause backlash, including legislatures (Bishin et. al, 2015; Haider-Markel, 2010; Price & Keck, 2015; Keck, 2009). Furthermore, political scientists have also extended the definition of “challenges to the status quo” to include the election of members of traditionally marginalized groups, suggesting that the increased descriptive representation of historically underrepresented groups may also lead to an unforeseen political backlash (Bishin et. al, 2015; Bishin & Smith, 2013; Haider-Markel, 2010; Sanbonmatsu, 2008; Haider-Markel, 2007; Preuhs, 2007; Bratton & Reingold, 2004; Kathlene, 2004; Bratton, 2002; Yoder, 1994).

Sanbonmatsu (2008) notes that negative reactions to a traditionally marginalized group’s increased descriptive representation can vary based on the magnitude of perceived changes to the status quo, such as the number of traditionally marginalized legislators who are elected, the rate at which they are elected, and the type of offices that such legislators win. Within Sanbonmatsu’s framework, resulting backlash reactions to increased representation among traditionally marginalized groups can manifest itself in three forms: (a) lower electoral success among otherwise qualified politicians associated with the marginalized group, (b) less tolerance directed
towards individual members of the group (rather than the identifying politicians themselves),
and/or (c) legislative opposition to the group overall through policy actions (Sanbonmatsu 2008).
Of the three potential negative responses to increased descriptive representation, political
scientists have most closely examined the third response, or a legislative backlash.

Under a legislative backlash, the perceived policy gains acquired by traditionally
marginalized groups may lead traditionally dominant legislators to introduce and pass legislation
counterproductive to the marginalized group’s progress (Haider-Markel, 2010; Haider-Markel,
2007; Bratton, 2002). In some cases, empirical data has supported claims that an increase in
legislators from historically underrepresented groups results in such legislative backlashes.
Bratton’s (2002) analysis of state legislative bills revealed a correlation between an increase in
Black descriptive representation and an increase in legislation counterproductive to the interests
of the Black community. Furthermore, Haider-Markel (2007) found that while the presence of
openly queer state legislators increased the likelihood of pro-LGBTQ+ legislation being
introduced and passed, it also significantly increased the likelihood of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation
being introduced and passed.

*Backlash Theory Surrounding Women*

Past research, political theory, and historical precedent suggest that an increase in female
state legislators will also result in a legislative backlash contrary to women's interests.
Throughout American history, there has always been a gender hierarchy within American
politics, wherein men have dominated the norms, procedures, and goals of legislatures
(Reingold, 2008; Ritter, 2008). According to scholars, such political premises have ultimately
infused legislative bodies with masculine expectations, thus constructing legislatures as
"gendered institutions" that inherently favor male legislators in their "processes, practices,
images and ideologies, and distributions of power” (Wolbrecht, 2008; Rosenthal, 1997). Thus, the introduction of female legislators into these traditionally masculine bodies may lead some male legislators to believe that increased female representation is a threat to their dominant positions of power in the political status quo, causing them to act with hostility towards their female colleagues (Haider-Markel, 2010; Reingold, 2008; Thomas, 1994).

Earlier studies have found that female representatives oftentimes experience patterns of social isolation from their male counterparts in legislatures, and that as the proportion of female representatives participating in legislative committees increases, male representatives become more verbally aggressive and conversationally dominant during proceedings (Reingold, 2008; Haider-Markel, 2007; Kathlene, 1994). Some scholars have interpreted these actions as evidence that the increased presence of female representatives results in a behavioral backlash from male representatives who feel threatened (Maybee, 2008; Reingold, 2008; Haider-Markel, 2007; Kathlene, 1994). As a result, one may infer that such attempts by male legislators to preserve historically masculine power and control over legislatures may also translate into a legislative backlash. However, such a hypothesis has yet to be adequately supported. Although Bratton (2002) found evidence suggesting that an increase in the number of female legislators is associated a legislative backlash against women, Bratton and Ray’s (2002) similar analysis of female legislators in Norway failed to find evidence that increased female representation leads to a legislative backlash.

Thus, although the existing body of empirical research surrounding legislative backlashes in general requires significant expansion (Haider-Markel, 2010; Haider-Markel, 2007; Bratton, 2002; Bratton & Ray, 2002), scholarship regarding the existence of a legislative backlash in response to women’s increased descriptive representation specifically remains ambiguous and
limited. While past research implies that an increase in female legislators could result in a similar legislative backlash contrary to women’s interests, previous work has failed to find empirical evidence of a legislative backlash against women’s increased descriptive representation (Reingold, 2008; Haider-Markel, 2007; Kathlene, 1994; Maybee, 2008). My research will fill that gap in the literature by exploring not only whether an increase in women’s descriptive representation results in a legislative backlash, but, if so, how it manifests itself. By advancing research in this area, political scientists and organizers alike will be able to better understand the dynamics of descriptive representation, and how historically underrepresented groups can best make policy gains while minimizing the risk of policy losses from a potentially hostile ruling majority.

Research Design

Hypotheses

My research analyzes all women’s issue bills from state six state House sessions during a ten-year period from 1999 to 2009. I accomplish this task through a two-phase analysis that explores whether women’s increased descriptive representation results in a legislative backlash and, if so, how such a backlash may occur. For the first phase of my research, I analyze whether an increase in women’s descriptive representation in state legislatures will lead to the “offensive” form of legislative backlash that has been attributed to the increased presence of Black and queer legislators, wherein opponents actively propose bills harmful to women’s rights. For this phase of my research, I predict that: (a) an increase in pro-women’s legislation and (b) an increase in anti-women’s legislation. If my hypotheses are correct, such findings will both support previous claims about a positive relationship between descriptive representation and substantive
representation and claims about the existence of an offensive legislative backlash towards women’s increased presence in state bodies.

Past scholarship also implies that the legislative backlash towards female legislators takes on a “defensive” approach, with opponents blocking bills beneficial to women (Ghelen, 1977; Volden et. al, 2010; Wittmer & Bouché, 2013). Therefore, in the second phase of my study, I focus more closely on bills identified in the first phase of my research as “pro-women,” and use the gender composition of each bill’s sponsorship as a metric for female descriptive representation to examine if a more subtle form of backlash impacts the legislative trajectory of pro-women’s bills. For this second phase, I predict that as the proportion of female sponsorship on pro-women’s bills increases, such bills would be less likely to: (a) receive action in state House committees or on state House floors, (b) pass state Houses, (c) receive action in state Senate committees or on state Senate floors, (d) pass state Senates, or (e) be signed into law by a given state’s governor. If these hypotheses are correct, such findings will also support claims about the existence of a defensive legislative backlash in response to women’s increased presence in state bodies.

Phase One: Offensive Backlash Responses

The empirical framework for my first phase of research builds on Haider-Markel’s work (2007; 2010) that examined the how increased queer descriptive representation affected the amount of both pro- and anti-LGBT+ bills introduced by other legislators from 1992 to 2002. After producing a count variable of all queer legislators from each session as well as a count variable of pro- and anti-LGBT+ bills introduced and passed in each state per year, Haider-Markel found that greater numbers of openly queer elected officials increased both the number of pro-LGBT+ and anti-LGBT+ legislation, with a net difference of overall positive effects for the
queer community. Such findings both highlight the potential political gains and unintended legislative backlash that traditionally underrepresented groups can find from increased descriptive representation in legislative bodies (Haider-Markel, 2007; 2010).

This first phase of research adopts a modified approach to Haider-Markel’s empirical design by exploring the relationship between women’s descriptive representation and the introduction of legislation both beneficial and counterproductive to women’s interests. My analysis covers state legislative sessions spanning from 1999 to 2009. This time period should provide a robust study of reactions to women’s descriptive representation since the number of women elected to state legislatures underwent significant fluctuations following the 2000 elections (Caizza 2004). However, due to both time constraints and data availability, the scope of my research is much narrower than Haider-Markel’s original study, which analyzed bills originating from both the upper and lower chambers of all fifty state legislatures.

During the early stages of my research design, I found that the most effective way to collect data on women’s issue legislation was to manually search state legislative databases, a task that was both lengthy and tedious. Initial data acquisition revealed that obtaining data on women’s issue legislation for only one legislative session in one legislative chamber of one state took an average of 1.5 hours to complete. In order to construct a sample of women’s issue legislation from the 1999-2009 sessions in both chambers of all state legislatures, I would have had to repeat this process several hundred times over. I had neither the time nor the resources to collect a data sample of this large scale. Therefore, I chose to adopt a case study approach for my

---

1 Ideally, to empirically test whether an increase in women’s descriptive representation results in a legislative backlash, I would draw from a sample of women’s issue legislation that encapsulates all legislative sessions from 1999-2009 from both chambers of all 50 state legislatures. However, in order to select from such a sample, I would first have to compile the data myself because a complete dataset does not currently exist. At present time, compiling such a dataset would be a difficult task. Since state governments function independently of each other, records of women’s issue legislation is inconsistent across states. Furthermore, many state legislative databases are poorly designed, hindering efficient data acquisition as well as quicker, automated methods of data collection such as web scraping.
research design. After considering the data collection that would be required, I determined I had sufficient time and resources to study the House chambers of six state legislatures as case studies in order to effectively isolate and identify a potential legislative backlash against women.

Case Selection. In my case selection, I chose to focus on bills originating from lower state chambers, or state Houses. Although the upper chambers, or state Senates, of legislatures are a crucial component of states’ legislative frameworks, their fewer number of seats provide fewer opportunities for descriptive female representation and their broader constituencies tend to result in more moderate policy proposals. In comparison, greater numbers of seats in state Houses provide greater opportunities for women’s descriptive representation and structural differences that make state Houses more reflective of the general population allow legislators more to propose a wider, more responsive range of policies. As a result, focusing primarily on state Houses allowed me to search for a more reactive, salient offensive backlash effect in response to women’s increased descriptive representation that may have been lost in the culture of state Senates.

When identifying which state Houses to analyze, my case selection was primarily influenced by the initial proportion of women present in each state legislature’s lower chamber during 1999 and how these proportions changed over the subsequent ten years. While the literature suggests that an increase in women’s descriptive representation will lead to an increase in both pro- and anti-women’s legislation, it also implies that a state body’s specific proportion of female legislators can significantly influence whether female representatives experience legislative progress or backlash (Haider-Markel, 2007). Traditional scholarship on “critical mass theory” suggests that once female descriptive representation reaches a 15 percent “critical mass” threshold, it leads to a marked increase in female substantive representation (Bratton, 2002;
Kathlene, 1994). However, backlash theorists have also found that as female representation surpasses the 15 percent threshold, it leads to a decline in active representation by female legislators (Haider-Markel, 2007). Scholars have interpreted this decline in impact as evidence of a potential backlash to the larger presence of women in traditionally male-dominated legislatures (Bratton, 2002; Sanbonmatsu, 2008; Yoder, 1994).

After compiling data about the number of women in state legislatures from the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), I calculated the proportion of female legislators in state Houses during 1999 sessions as well as the proportion of female legislators in state Houses during 2009.\(^2\) Once I completed my calculations, I then chose to divide state legislatures into three categories based on their relationship to the 15 percent critical mass threshold: (a) states above critical mass (those that had a proportion of female representation greater than 15 percent in 1999 and maintained a proportion greater than 15 percent into 2009), (b) states crossing critical mass (those that had a proportion less than 15 percent in 1999, but obtained a proportion greater than 15 percent by 2009), and (c) states below critical mass (those that had a proportion less than 15 percent in 1999 and still remained below 15 percent in 2009). I then selected two states that fell into each category. Wisconsin and Washington were selected to represent states above critical mass, Indiana and South Dakota were selected to represent states crossing critical mass, and Pennsylvania and Alabama were selected to represent states below critical mass (see

\[^2\] Using these proportions, I initially found the net proportional growth of women’s representation within the lower chambers of state legislatures from 1999 to 2009 by using the formula, 

\[
\frac{\text{Proportion 2009} - \text{Proportion 1999}}{\text{Proportion 1999}}
\]

Although these calculations helped provide a contextual understanding of representative shifts within each state legislature, I ultimately concluded that the net proportional growth of female representation did not have as great an influence in the case selection process as each state legislature’s level of critical mass. To select cases based on changes in net proportion would likely obscure the actual magnitude of women’s representation in state legislatures. For example, although Washington experienced a 1.62% loss from 1999 to 2009, women still comprised 29.59% of Washington’s state House in 2009, which is among the highest proportions of women’s representation in the United States.
Table 1). Despite limitations in the case selection process, these selected state Houses provide both regional and political variation, thus allowing for a robust research sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>Above Threshold</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>+10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Above Threshold</td>
<td>37.76%</td>
<td>29.59%</td>
<td>-21.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>Crossing Threshold</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>+42.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>Crossing Threshold</td>
<td>12.86%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>+55.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Below Threshold</td>
<td>12.32%</td>
<td>13.30%</td>
<td>+8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>Below Threshold</td>
<td>7.62%</td>
<td>12.38%</td>
<td>+62.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Selected state Houses for case studies.

**Dependent Variable.** For the first phase of my research exploring whether increased female representation leads to an offensive legislative backlash, I measure my dependent variable of legislative action related to women’s issues by producing a count variable of the annual number of pro- and anti-women bills introduced and passed in each state House during the 1999 to 2009 legislative sessions. All data regarding relevant bills were obtained from each state legislature’s digital archives through a central database portal provided by National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), and coded as either “pro-women” or “anti-women” based on its substantive content. Within the literature, the practice of defining particular legislation as “pro-women” or “anti-women” remains a controversial topic for two reasons.

First, such classifications carry the potential to perpetuate stereotypes surrounding women’s gender roles. In many cases, issues such as those related to children, education, healthcare, social welfare, or the environment are oftentimes assumed to be “women’s issues” because of the “soft” or compassionate connotations associated with these policy areas (Cammisa & Reingold, 2000; Wolbrecht, 2000). Second, it is impossible to classify legislation related to issues such as access to abortions or funding to Planned Parenthood as either pro- or anti-women without invoking significant partisan implications. Currently, there is a clear
ideological divide between Democrats and Republicans surrounding issues related to women’s reproduction. While Democrats tend to classify policies that support abortion and Planned Parenthood as policies that are “pro-women,” Republicans tend to classify the exact same policies as “anti-women” (Wolbrecht, 2000).

However, despite these caveats, there is a general consensus throughout the literature that pro-women policies can be best defined as those that “expand women’s roles and opportunities, either through legal equality or some form of acknowledgement of women’s special needs” (Wolbrecht, 2000). Furthermore, there are several resources that can provide guidelines for classifying policies as pro- or anti-women according to universal standards. For my analysis, I model my classifications based on the Institute for Women’s Policy Research’s (IWPR) “Women’s Rights and Resources Checklist of State Policies.” This checklist can be used to measure a state’s commitment to policies intended to help women achieve economic, political, and social well-being. IWPR developed this checklist based on standards unanimously adopted by the 189 countries that attended the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995—including the United States—with endorsed policies including those that advance protection from violence, access to income support through welfare and child support collection, employment protections, and reproductive rights (Caiazza, 2004). By following these standards, I thus coded my dependent variable in a way that is as unbiased and non-partisan as possible. Details regarding this coding schema can be found in Appendix A.

*Independent and Control Variables.* To measure my independent variable of women’s descriptive representation, I calculated the proportion of female legislators serving in each state from 1999 to 2009 based on the same CAWP data that I used during my case selection. This variable captures the potential for female legislators to sponsor legislation that could be
classified as pro-women or to oppose legislation that could be classified as anti-women.

Although the proportion of female legislators is the key variable in my measure of descriptive representation, prior research also suggests that a number of institutional legislative characteristics will likely influence how each state’s House reacts to the presence of female representatives and require inclusion as control variables.

For this phase of my research, I chose to control for two key factors. First, I controlled for where the proportion of female legislators in each House session was in relation to the 15 percent critical mass threshold. As previously stated in earlier discussion, scholarship suggests that if the proportion of female representation surpasses 15 percent of a legislative body, it could potentially trigger an offensive legislative backlash. Therefore, when constructing regression models for first phase of my study, I also split my sample based on whether a session fell above or below the 15 percent threshold. Here, I expected that the relationship between female descriptive backlash and offensive backlash effects would be more pronounced above this 15 percent threshold than below the threshold. However, neither of these models produced statistically or substantively significant results, so they have been excluded from subsequent data analysis in this paper.

Second, I controlled for which political party was in control of the state government during each given House session, since a legislative body’s partisan composition can also influence legislative reactions to female representation (Bratton & Haynie, 1999; Bishin et. al, 2015; Haider-Markel, 2010). Currently, there is a significant gender gap between women’s support for the Democratic and Republican parties, as the two political parties have developed two distinctly different approaches to women’s issues (Caiazza, 2004; Haider-Markel, 2010; Wolbrecht 2000). Since the early 1970s, studies on legislators have found a significant
correlation between Democratic Party membership and support for women’s rights. Democrats have been more likely than Republicans to focus on women’s interests and support policies considered beneficial to women on issues such as the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, comparable worth, child care, and antidiscrimination (Caiazza, 2004; Haider-Markel, 2010; Wolbrecht 2000).

Furthermore, research indicates that while an increase in gender diversity is associated with a lower number of legislative measures contrary to women’s interests among Democrats, it is associated with a higher number of legislative measures contrary to women’s interests among Republicans (Bratton, 2002). Such findings indicate a clear partisan difference in reactions towards increased female descriptive representation and suggest that a legislative backlash will be more likely to occur among Republican than Democratic lines. To measure the influence of partisanship within each state legislature, I created three dummy variables that indicated whether a given House session occurred when the state government was dominated by Democrats, Republicans, or split between the two parties based on records maintained by the NCSL.

**Phase Two: Defensive Backlash Responses**

Although the first phase of my study analyzes more blatant manifestations of legislative backlash to women’s increased descriptive representation, this measure alone fails to capture the complexity of opposition responses to women’s progress. Currently, there is a great diversity of “pro-women’s” legislation such as bills related to insurance coverage of mammograms, equal pay, or maternity leave on record in state legislative databases. In contrast, the only type of legislation within state records that can be classified as “anti-women” relate to restricting women’s reproductive rights. While such bills are coded as “anti-women” under this study’s classification, they provide a far narrower scope of what constitutes a legislative backlash when
compared to Haider-Markel’s classification of “anti-LGBTQ+” legislation, which included bills that would ban same-sex marriage, prevent LGBTQ+ organizations in public schools, ban same sex couples from being foster parents, and prevent positive discussions of homosexuality in sex education courses (Haider Markel, 2007; 2010).

Furthermore, while legislative backlash towards queer legislators appears to take on an “offensive” approach, with opponents actively proposing bills harmful to the queer community (Haider-Markel, 2007; 2010), the legislative backlash towards female legislators seems to take on a “defensive” approach, with opponents obstructing women’s rights by blocking bills or defunding programs beneficial to women (Ghelen, 1977; Volden et. al, 2010; Wittmer & Bouché, 2013). Although empirical studies have suggested that female legislators are just as effective as their male counterparts in passing the bills they introduce and blocking the bills they oppose (Bratton & Haynie, 1999; Herrick, 2010), the literature has also revealed a curious pattern surrounding the passage of bills relating to women’s issues. For, research also implies that disproportionate female sponsorship on pro-women’s issues may be detrimental to the content of pro-women’s legislation or funding (Wittmer & Bouché, 2013).

These findings suggest that women’s sponsorship on women’s issue bills may serve as an additional proxy measurement for women’s descriptive representation within state legislatures. Within the literature, bill sponsorship is recognized as action that not only signals a legislator’s policy priorities, but demonstrates a legislator’s leadership and political power (Wittmer & Bouché, 2013). While disproportionate male or equitable male-female sponsorship of women’s issue bills may be viewed benevolently, disproportionate female sponsorship on a women’s issue bill may serve as a subconscious reminder to male legislators about an increasing female presence and participation in historically male-dominated state legislatures. Such reminders
about this interruption of the status quo may result in male legislators failing to support female-sponsored pro-women’s legislation by letting bills die in committee, attaching problematic riders or amendments, or even voting against the legislation when it comes to the floor. As a result, the second phase of this study attempts to empirically capture manifestations of a more subtle “defensive” legislative backlash towards women by measuring the legislative success rate of pro-women bills based on the ratio of female to male sponsorship.

**Dependent Variable.** In order to examine a potential defensive backlash response to women’s increased descriptive representation, I coded my dependent variable as an ordinal dependent variable that measured how far a women’s issue bill advanced in a given state House session on a scale of 0 to 7. On this scale, a 0 indicates that a bill received “no action or died in committee,” 1 indicates a bill received “action in a state House committee,” 2 indicates a bill received “action on the state House floor,” 3 indicates a bill “passed the state House,” 4 indicates a bill received “action in a state Senate committee,” 5 indicates a bill received “action on the state Senate floor,” 6 indicates a bill “passed the state Senate,” and 7 indicates a bill “became law.” Unlike other forms of analysis that only consider a bill’s success rate in terms of its introduction and passage, this type of analysis reveals relevant differences in how successfully pro-women’s bills are passed throughout the key immediate stages of the legislative process based on gender dynamics (Volden et. al 2010).

**Independent and Control Variables.** In the second phase of my study, I expand upon the first phase’s independent variable of women’s descriptive representation by focusing more closely on bills identified by the first phase’s classification as “pro-women,” and investigating how the gender composition of each bill’s sponsorship impacts its legislative trajectory. In order to measure women’s descriptive representation as it relates to a defensive backlash, I calculated
the proportion of female sponsorship on each pro-women bill based on legislator rosters available on state databases. This proportion of female sponsorship functions as my main independent variable of interest.

For this phase of my research, I chose to control for two other characteristics related to a pro-women bill’s sponsorship and content that may affect its ultimate success of passage. First, I controlled for the proportion of Democratic sponsorship on each pro-women bill. Given previous discussion regarding positive associations between the Democratic Party and women’s issues, one may infer that Democrats will be more likely than Republicans to sponsor a pro-women bill. However, while higher proportions of Democratic sponsorship may be beneficial to a pro-women bill’s progress in Democratic-controlled sessions, such high Democratic sponsorship is likely to result in greater opposition towards a pro-women bill in a Republican-controlled session. Just as I found the proportion of female sponsorship on each pro-women bill using R-programming, I used the same coding to calculate the proportion of Democratic sponsorship based on state legislative rosters from state databases.

Second, I controlled for the legislative content found in each pro-women bill itself. Given the different levels associated with different types of pro-women’s bills, I thought it important to acknowledge the reality that legislators may react less favorably towards a pro-women bill related to reproductive rights than to a pro-women bill related to domestic violence and safety. Therefore, I coded seven dummy variables regarding different policy areas that a pro-women bill could address based on the same IWPR standards that informed my coding of pro- versus anti-women bills in Phase One of my research. These categories include “employment and earnings,” “poverty and opportunity,” “health and well-being,” “reproductive rights,” “violence and safety,” “work and family,” and “political participation.”
Examples of pro-women bills related to “employment and earnings” included bills that sought to address the gender wage gap, while bills related to “poverty and opportunity” included bills that increased Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) funding. Similarly, examples of pro-women bills related to “health and well-being” included bills that sought to require health insurance coverage for breast cancer, bills related to “reproductive rights” included bills that sought to expand access to abortion services, and bills related to “violence and safety” included increased penalties against domestic abusers. Finally, examples of pro-women bills related to “work and family” included bills that sought to require employers to provide mothers with paid maternity leave, and “political participation” included bills that sought to form a state-sponsored Commission for Women. More examples of pro-women bills in each policy area can be found in Appendix A.

Data

Offensive Backlash Results

When exploring potential offensive legislative backlash effects in the first phase of my research, I used multivariate least squares regression, which allows for easy interpretation of the impact of women’s descriptive representation on the number of pro- and anti-women bills introduced per session. Following data acquisition, I was able to produce a dataset of observations for 51 legislative sessions, which functioned as my unit of analysis. Using this dataset, I first analyzed the average legislative characteristics that could be found within the Alabama, Indiana, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Washington, and Wisconsin state Houses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-women bills (count)</td>
<td>12.000</td>
<td>10.032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-women bills (count)</td>
<td>2.059</td>
<td>1.475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral bills (count)</td>
<td>0.765</td>
<td>1.380</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From 1999 to 2009, approximately 12 pro-women bills, 2 anti-women bills, and 1 neutral bill was introduced during the average legislative session.\(^3\) During this ten-year period, female representatives comprised on average 17 percent of House chambers, 2 percentage points above the recognized 15 percent critical mass threshold. Furthermore, 33 percent of sessions were controlled by Democrats, 37 percent were controlled by Republicans, and 29 percent were split in terms of partisan control.

In order to test my hypotheses that an increase in women’s descriptive representation in state legislatures would lead to (a) an increase in legislation beneficial and (b) an increase in legislation counterproductive to women’s interests, I ran three main regression models. For my first model, I used the number of pro-women bills introduced per session as my dependent variable to test whether an increase in women’s descriptive representation would lead to an increase in pro-women bills. In my second model, I used the number of anti-women bills introduced per session as my dependent variable to test whether an increase in women’s descriptive representation would lead to an increase in anti-women bills. Finally, for my third model, I used the number of neutral women bills introduced per session as my dependent variable to test whether an increase in women’s descriptive representation would have any effect on the number of neutral women bills as a supplement to my hypotheses. Table 3 shows the results of these regression models below.

---

\(^3\) Here, a “neutral bill” is defined as a bill related to women but considered neither explicitly pro- nor anti-women, i.e. bills requiring hospitals to provide women with information about cord blood banking.
As Table 3 demonstrates, the relationship between the proportion of female representatives and the number of pro-women bills produced in a given session failed to be statistically significant. As a result, these results suggest that an increase in female descriptive representation does not lead to an increase in substantive representation. Such findings fail to support the first of my hypotheses surrounding an offensive backlash effect and are surprising because they depart from a robust literature that has consistently suggested there is a direct correlation between descriptive and substantive representation.

However, the results produced in my second regression model, which used the number of anti-women bills introduced per session as its dependent variable, appear to support the second of my hypotheses surrounding an offensive backlash effect. As one can observe in Table 3, the relationship between the proportion of female representatives and the number of anti-women bills introduced per legislative session is statistically significant at a .10-level. Therefore, it is likely there exists relationship between the proportion of female representatives in a state House and the number of anti-women bills introduced in a given session.

### Table 3. OLS Predictions about effect of increased female descriptive representation on types of women’s bills introduced per session.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Pro-Women Bills</th>
<th>Anti-Women Bills</th>
<th>Neutral Women Bills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportion female legislators</td>
<td>-1.175 (20.593)</td>
<td>4.967 (2.907)*</td>
<td>-8.964 (2.392)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican control</td>
<td>0.366 (3.452)</td>
<td>-0.369 (0.487)</td>
<td>-0.791 (0.401)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Split control</td>
<td>-0.613 (3.694)</td>
<td>-0.669 (0.521)</td>
<td>-0.551 (0.429)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>12.254 (4.238)**</td>
<td>1.529 (0.598)*</td>
<td>2.782 (5.65)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of observations</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.081</td>
<td>0.288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>-0.062</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>0.243</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Values represent OLS parameter estimates with standard errors in parentheses. Democratic control omitted due to collinearity.

*p < 0.10, two-tailed; **p < 0.05, two-tailed.
Figure 1. Aggregate correlation between proportion of female representatives in state Houses and number of women’s bills considered counterproductive to women’s progress. Each dot represents the average number of bills considered counterproductive to women’s progress, with the proportion of female representation plotted at 0.05 increments. Averages were calculated based on model output to provide a simplified visual representation of the correlation.

As Figure 1 indicates, this relationship is direct, with the number of anti-women bills increasing as the proportion of female representation increases within state Houses. Such findings support the second of my hypotheses regarding an offensive backlash effect, and suggests the existence of a slight offensive legislative backlash in response to women’s growing representation in state Houses.

Curiously, my third regression model that used the number of neutral women’s bills introduced per session as its dependent variable also produced statistically significant findings. As demonstrated by Table 2, the relationship between the proportion of female representatives and the number of neutral women bills introduced per legislative session is statistically significant at a .05-level.
One can observe in Figure 2 that this relationship is inverse, with the number neutral women bills introduced per session decreasing as the proportion of female representation in state Houses increases. However, it is difficult to determine the dynamics that result in this trend. It is also worth noting that within this model, the data appear to suggest that a statistically significant inverse relationship exists between whether a state House is Republican-controlled and the number of neutral women bills introduced per session.

**Defensive Backlash Results**

When exploring potential defensive backlash effects in the second phase of my research, I chose to use ordered logistic regression since my dependent variable is an ordered variable that provides a rank order of how far a women’s issue bill has advanced in the legislative process. This regression technique thus allowed me to predict the probabilities of how far each women’s issue bill would progress based on other variables. During this second phase, individual pro-
women bills served as the unit of analysis, with my dataset providing observations for 756 pro-women bills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Final bill status</td>
<td>2.147</td>
<td>2.725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion female sponsorship</td>
<td>0.310</td>
<td>0.286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Democratic sponsorship</td>
<td>0.630</td>
<td>0.337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion female legislators</td>
<td>0.172</td>
<td>0.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic control</td>
<td>0.353</td>
<td>0.478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican control</td>
<td>0.374</td>
<td>0.484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Split control</td>
<td>0.272</td>
<td>0.446</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Summary statistics of pro-women bills from 1999-2009 legislative sessions (n=756). NOTE: n=747 for “Percentage Democratic sponsorship.

From Table 4, one can observe that when considering the dependent variable of how far a given pro-women bill will progress, the mean for a given pro-women’s issue bill is 2.14 or approximately 2 on the legislative trajectory scale of 0 to 7 (with 0 indicating a bill received “no action or died in committee” and 7 indicating a bill was “signed into law”). This mean suggests that the average women’s issue bill only advances far enough to receive “action on the House floor.” However, this variable also has a relatively large standard deviation of 2.75, suggesting a considerable amount of variability surrounding how far a given pro-women bill may advance.
Furthermore, Figure 3 demonstrates the overall distribution of how far pro-women’s issue bills advance on average throughout the legislative process. As one can observe, although the majority of bills only reach a 0 in terms of advancement (‘dying in committee’), large numbers of bills also advance to a 1 (‘receiving action in a House committee’) and a 7-level (‘becoming a law.’)

In addition, my main independent variable of female sponsorship has a mean of only approximately 0.31, which indicates that only 31 percent of the average women’s issue bill’s sponsorship comes from female legislators. Although this number may seem small, given that on average female legislators hold only 25.2 percent of state Houses across America (Center for American Women in Politics, 2016), this proportion is relatively large when viewed as a metric for women’s descriptive representation and may therefore trigger a defensive legislative backlash effect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Pro-Women Bills</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Addresses employment and earning</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>0.219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses poverty and opportunity</td>
<td>0.030</td>
<td>0.172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses health and well-being</td>
<td>0.184</td>
<td>0.388</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Addresses reproductive rights | 0.206 | 0.405
Addresses violence and safety | 0.384 | 0.487
Addresses work and family | 0.123 | 0.329
Addresses political participation | 0.022 | 0.148

Table 5. Summary statistics of types of pro-women bills from 1999-2009 legislative sessions (n=756).

Furthermore, when examining the types of categories that women’s issue legislation tends to fall under in Table 5, one can observe that pro-women bills most frequently relate to issues concerning violence against women and safety (38 percent), reproductive rights (21 percent), and women’s healthcare (18 percent).

Additionally, because the mean proportion of Democratic sponsorship on pro-women bills is 0.63, one may infer that the average women’s issue bill is disproportionately sponsored by Democrats.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Democratic Affiliation by Gender</th>
<th>N of Observations</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>924</td>
<td>0.541</td>
<td>0.499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4,459</td>
<td>0.469</td>
<td>0.499</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Democratic affiliation based on legislators’ gender.

When looking more closely at the Democratic affiliation of legislators overall, it is interesting to note that on average, 54 percent of female legislators from the 1999 to 2009 legislative sessions identified themselves as Democrats, while only 47 percent of male legislators identified themselves as Democrats. Such results therefore appear to support contemporary claims of a gender gap in terms of political ideology between women and men.

My defensive backlash hypotheses predicted that pro-women bills more heavily sponsored by women would be less likely to: (a) receive action in state House committees or on state House floors, (b) pass state Houses, (c) receive action in State Senate committees or on state Senate floors, (d) pass state Senates, or (e) become signed into law by a given state’s governor.
### Ordered Logistic Predictions About Pro-Women Bill Advancement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Final Bill Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportion female sponsorship</td>
<td>0.127 (0.257)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Democratic sponsorship</td>
<td>-0.673 (0.220)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion female legislators</td>
<td>4.067 (0.896)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic control</td>
<td>0.667 (0.180)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican control</td>
<td>0.052 (0.185)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses employment and earning</td>
<td>0.405 (0.563)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses poverty and opportunity</td>
<td>0.314 (0.620)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses health and well-being</td>
<td>-0.093 (0.498)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses reproductive rights</td>
<td>-0.649 (0.497)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses violence and safety</td>
<td>0.398 (0.479)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses work and family</td>
<td>-0.132 (0.512)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of observations</td>
<td>747</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prob &gt; Chi²</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²</td>
<td>0.0348</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 7.** Ordered logistic predictions about effect of increased female sponsorship on pro-women bill advancement.  
**NOTE:** Values represent OLogit parameter estimates with standard errors in parentheses. Split control and bills related to political participation omitted due to collinearity.  
*p< 0.10, two-tailed; ** p < 0.05, two-tailed.

Based on the results produced by my regression model, one can observe that three of my independent variables are statistically significant at p<0.05. The first of these variables is the proportion of Democratic sponsors and co-sponsors on a given pro-women’s bill. For this variable p <0.05, meaning that there is likely a statistical relationship between the proportion of Democratic representatives sponsoring a pro-women’s issue bill and how far a bill advances in the legislative process, holding all other variables constant. This variable’s negative coefficient further suggests that, controlling for other independent variables, as the proportion of Democratic sponsorship on a pro-women’s issue bill increases, the probability that the bill will advance farther in the legislative process decreases. Such findings are interesting, as one may wonder what qualities related to greater Democratic sponsorship could impede a given pro-women bill’s progress.
However, one potential explanation may be inferred based on the characteristics of another statistically significant independent variable: Democratic control. Statistically significant with $p < 0.05$, it is likely there is a statistical relationship between whether a state House is controlled by Democrats and how far a pro-women’s bill will advance in the legislative process, holding all other variables constant. This variable’s positive coefficient suggests that, controlling for all other independent variables, if a pro-women’s bill is introduced during a Democratic-controlled session, the probability that the bill will advance further in the legislative process increases. This correlation suggests that although increased Democratic sponsorship may decrease the likelihood of how far a pro-women’s bill will advance, this trend is more specific in Republican-controlled sessions than Democratic-controlled sessions.

Finally, the other independent variable that is statically significant in this model is the proportion of female legislators in the state House during a given session. Of the three independent variables found to be statistically significant, this variable is most relevant to my defensive backlash theses. In this model, the proportion of female sponsors and cosponsors on a given pro-women’s bill fails to be statistically significant, thus failing to support my overarching defensive backlash hypothesis that pro-women bills more heavily sponsored by women will be less likely to advance in the legislative process.

However, the fact that the proportion of female legislators in a session is statistically significant presents an interesting insight into the broader dynamics surrounding women’s bills throughout legislative process. With $p < 0.05$, it is likely there is a statistical relationship between the proportion of female representatives in a state House and how far a bill advances in the legislative process. The variable’s positive coefficient further indicates that as this proportion of female representatives in a given state House increases, the probability that the bill will advance
farther in the legislative process increases, holding all other variables constant. Such a relationship suggests that although the results produced from the offensive backlash phase of my thesis failed to support the existence of a direct relationship between the proportion of female representatives and the number of pro-women bills introduced, increased female representation in a state House may be beneficial in helping to farther advance the pro-women bills that are introduced during the legislative process than would have been otherwise possible.

Yet, while this model found that the proportion of Democratic sponsorship, Democratic control of the legislature, and the proportion of female representatives are statistically significant, I was uncertain whether this statistical significance equated to substantive significance. Therefore, in order to more closely examine the influence of these independent variables on the average probability of how far a pro-women’s bill will advance, I ran Stata’s mchange function, which measures each independent variable’s marginal effect on the dependent variable, in order to better examine the impact of these variables. To gain a comprehensive understanding of each independent variable’s influence on the probability of how far a pro-women’s issue bill will advance, I first examined the baseline probabilities of the average pro-women bill’s legislative trajectory.
Figure 4. Probability of how far a bill considered productive to women’s progress will advance in the legislative process within a 95% CI.

As one may observe in Figure 4, holding all values constant, there is an average 0.45 probability that a pro-women bill will receive “no action or die in committee,” a 0.20 probability a bill will receive “action in a House committee,” a 0.03 probability a bill will receive “action on the House floor,” a 0.08 probability a bill will “pass the House,” a 0.03 probability a bill will “receive action in a Senate committee,” a 0.03 probability a bill will “receive action on the Senate floor,” a 0.004 probability a bill will “pass the Senate,” and a 0.19 probability a bill will “become law.” Based on these probabilities, one can infer that the majority of pro-women bills will not progress beyond the original House committees to which they are assigned.

When analyzing the marginal effect of the multiple independent variables on a pro-women bill’s legislative trajectory, I chose to focus on the three independent variables that were found to be statistically significant earlier in the process: the proportion of Democratic sponsorship of on pro-women bills, Democratic control of a House session, and the proportion of female representation in a House session.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Final Bill Status (+1 Unit Change)</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Democratic</td>
<td>Sponsorship</td>
<td>0.224**</td>
<td>-0.045**</td>
<td>-0.010**</td>
<td>-0.034**</td>
<td>-0.012**</td>
<td>-0.013**</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>-0.018**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic control</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.202**</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.006**</td>
<td>0.027**</td>
<td>0.011**</td>
<td>0.013**</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.138**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion female legislators</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.441**</td>
<td>-0.187**</td>
<td>-0.026**</td>
<td>-0.075**</td>
<td>-0.022**</td>
<td>-0.022**</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>0.777**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. Marginal effect of Democratic sponsorship, Democratic control, and female representation on probability of pro-women bill issue advancement (n=606.)

* p < 0.10, two-tailed; ** p < 0.05, two-tailed.

Looking at the marginal effect of Democratic sponsorship on pro-women bills in Table 8, one can see that holding all other variables constant at their observed values, if one increases the proportion of Democratic sponsorship on a pro-women bill by one unit, it increases the chance
that the bill will receive “no action or die in committee” while decreasing the chance that it will progress farther in all other categories of the legislative process. This trend appears to be statistically significant at p<0.05 across all phases of the legislative process except for a pro-women bill’s probability of “passing the Senate.”

Initially, the marginal effect of Democratic sponsorship on the trajectory of pro-women bills may appear to mostly be substantively insignificant. On average, a unit increase in Democratic sponsorship only leads to a 0.045 decrease in the probability of a bill “receiving action in a House committee,” a 0.010 decrease in the probability of a bill “receiving action on the House floor,” a 0.034 decrease in the probability of a bill “passing the House,” a 0.012 decrease in the probability of a bill “receiving action in a Senate committee,” a 0.002 decrease in the probability of a bill “receiving action on the Senate floor,” and a 0.108 decrease in the probability of a bill “becoming law.” However, a unit increase in Democratic sponsorship on a pro-women bill is also associated with a 0.224 increase in the probability that a bill will “receive action or die in committee and a 0.108 decrease in the probability that a bill will “become law.” Such findings therefore suggest that although Democratic sponsorship may not carry a substantive impact during the transitory phases of the legislative process, during the initial phase of the legislative process, Democratic sponsorship can have a significant influence in increasing the chances of a pro-women bill dying in committee and hinder its ultimate passage.

When examining the influence of Democratic control on the probability of how far a pro-women bill will advance in the legislative process, one can observe that holding all other variables constant at their observed values, if a pro-women bill is introduced in a Democratic-controlled House, it decreases the probability that a bill will “receive no action or die in committee,” while increasing the chances it will advance farther in all other categories of the
legislative process. This trend appears to be statistically significant at p<0.05 across the majority of these categories, although it fails to demonstrate a statistically significant relationship in influencing whether a pro-women bill will “receive action in a House committee,” or “pass the Senate.” Initially, the marginal effect of Democratic House control on the trajectory of pro-women bills may appear to mostly be substantively insignificant, much like the marginal effect of Democratic sponsorship on the trajectory of women’s issue bills. On average, a Democratic-controlled House only increases the probability that a bill will “receive action in a House committee” by 0.005, the probability a bill will “receive action on the House floor” by 0.006, the probability a bill will “pass the House” by 0.027, the probability a bill will “receive action in a Senate committee” by 0.011, and the probability a bill will “receive action on the Senate floor” by 0.013.

Yet, much like earlier trends observed when examining the marginal effect of Democratic sponsorship, the regression also reveals that if a pro-women bill is introduced during a Democratic-controlled session the probability that a bill will “receive no action or die in committee” decreases by 0.202 and the probability that a bill will “become law” increases by 0.138. Therefore, while whether or not a pro-women bill is introduced during a Democratic-controlled session may not have a large impact on other stages of the legislative process, Democratic control may improve the probability of a bill ultimately becoming law.

Finally, when analyzing the marginal effect of female representation within a House session on how far a pro-women bill will advance throughout the legislative process, one can see that holding all other variables constant, if one increases the proportion of female representation in a state House by one unit, the proportion of female representation in the House has the greatest influence on decreasing the probability that a bill will “receive no action or die in committee”
and increasing the probability that a bill will “become law,” holding all other variables constant. This trend is statistically significant $p<0.05$ across almost all categories of the legislative process, except for the probability of a bill “passing the House.”

As with analysis of Democratic sponsorship and Democratic control, the marginal effect of female representation in a state House is far too minute during the transitory phases of the legislative process to be considered substantively significant. However, more substantive results can instead be found when examining the marginal effect of female representation in the initial and final phases of the legislative process. Holding all other variables constant, a unit increase in the proportion of female representation decreases the probability that a bill will “receive no action or die in committee” by 0.441 and increases the probability that bill will “become law” by a 0.777. The large marginal effect of female representation on these two phases of the legislative process, especially the final phase of a bill “becoming law,” suggests substantial implications about the impact that an increased female presence in state legislatures may have when successfully advancing pro-women bills. One may see such effects visualized below in Figure 5.
Analyzing Partisan Dynamics

Given the apparent impact that partisanship has on a pro-women bill’s trajectory, based on the statistical significance of Democratic sponsorship and Democratic control, I then chose to further examine whether increased women’s representation would differently affect the progress of pro-women’s bills in Democratic-controlled sessions compared to Republican-controlled sessions. To achieve this purposes, I stratified my earlier ordered logistic model based on partisan control.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Final Bill Status (Democratic Control)</th>
<th>Final Bill Status (Republican Control)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportion female sponsorship</td>
<td>-0.772 (0.404)*</td>
<td>1.684 (0.620)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Democratic sponsorship</td>
<td>0.078 (0.457)</td>
<td>-2.474 (0.554)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion female legislators</td>
<td>3.239 (1.474)**</td>
<td>30.901 (4.962)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses employment and earning</td>
<td>-2.007 (1.100)*</td>
<td>-0.452 (1.584)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses poverty and opportunity</td>
<td>-0.400 (1.011)</td>
<td>2.702 (1.543)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses health and well-being</td>
<td>-0.110 (0.822)</td>
<td>0.233 (1.136)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses reproductive rights</td>
<td>0.049 (0.946)</td>
<td>-0.943 (1.284)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses violence and safety</td>
<td>0.652 (0.785)</td>
<td>0.932 (1.111)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses work and family</td>
<td>0.268 (0.867)</td>
<td>0.491 (1.150)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of observations</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prob &gt; Chi²</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²</td>
<td>0.051</td>
<td>0.200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9. Ordered logistic predictions about effect of increased female sponsorship on pro-women bill advancement based on partisan control.

NOTE: Values represent OLogit parameter estimates with standard errors in parentheses. Split control and bills related to political participation omitted due to collinearity.

*p < 0.10, two-tailed; ** p < 0.05, two-tailed.

Comparing the results based on these two partisan models in Table 9, one can discern some interesting similarities. Under both Democratic and Republican-controlled legislative sessions, there is a statistically significant direct correlation between the proportion of women in the state legislature and how far a pro-women bill will progress, holding all other variables
constant. Under both forms of party control, this relationship is significant at p<0.05. Yet, aside from this trend, other statistically significant characteristics found under the two types of party control appear to diverge. Holding all other variables constant, there is a statistically significant relationship in Republican-controlled sessions that as Democratic sponsorship on a pro-women bill increases, the likelihood of a bill becoming law decreases. Such a trend does not exist in Democratic-controlled legislatures.

However, given the naturally adversarial nature of the Democratic and Republican parties within America’s two-party system, such findings seem fairly intuitive. When a given party is in control, majority party leaders such as the Speaker of the House have the ability to set the legislative agenda and regulate the flow of legislation. Thus, during a Republican-controlled session, House leadership would most likely seek to discourage the advancement of Democratic initiatives as early as possible in the legislative process. Furthermore, Republican legislators who constitute the majority of the chamber would have the ability to block a heavily Democratically-sponsored bill, should it advance further in the legislative process. Yet, during a Democratic-controlled session, such a conflict would not exist, thus allowing a bill with higher Democratic sponsorship to more easily progress without opposition.

Perhaps the most surprising findings of these partisan models are the results surrounding how the proportion of female sponsors on a pro-women bill affects a bill’s legislative trajectory. Within the context of this study, the proportion of female sponsorship on pro-women bills serves as the primary independent variable in determining whether a form of defensive backlash exists, wherein as female sponsorship on pro-women’s legislation increases, legislators will be more likely to block the bill’s passage. When the defensive backlash is put in a partisan context, one may initially infer that given voting trends indicating the Democratic Party tends to have
policies considered more attractive to female constituents and that, within this dataset, female legislators are more likely to be Democratic, forms of defensive backlash would be less salient or non-existent within Democratic-controlled sessions. Yet, the results of my research suggest just the opposite.

Looking at Table 9, one can observe that within Democratic-controlled legislators the proportion of female sponsorship is statistically significant at $p<0.10$. Thus, there is a slight likelihood that there is a statistical relationship between the number of female representatives sponsoring a pro-women bill and how far a bill advances in the legislative process, holding all other variables constant. This variable’s negative coefficient additionally suggests that, controlling for other variables, as the proportion of female sponsorship on a pro-women bill increases, the probability that the bill will advance farther in the legislative process decreases. Such findings support my hypothesis that an increase in female descriptive representation results in a defensive legislative backlash. However, the data suggest that the presence of a defensive legislative backlash in Republican-controlled sessions is not only absent, but that as the proportion of female sponsorship on pro-women bills increases, the probability that the bill will progress further in the legislative process increases, holding all other variables constant. This relationship is statistically significant at $p<0.05$.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Final Bill Status (+1 Unit Change)</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportion female</td>
<td>0.151 *</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>-0.012</td>
<td>-0.013</td>
<td>-0.020*</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>-0.116**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sponsorship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Democratic</td>
<td>-0.013</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sponsorship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion female</td>
<td>-0.251**</td>
<td>-0.222**</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
<td>-0.047**</td>
<td>-0.033*</td>
<td>-0.035</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0.599**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>legislators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10. Marginal effect of female sponsorship, Democratic sponsorship, and female representation on probability of pro-women bill issue advancement (n=204.)
NOTE: Model unable to calculate marginal effect of independent variables on probability a bill will “pass the Senate” due to limited number of data.
Furthermore, as Table 10 indicates, under Democratic-controlled sessions, the marginal effect of female sponsorship on pro-women bills is only statistically significant at \( p < 0.10 \) for three stages of the legislative process. These stages include the average probability of a pro-women bill for “receiving no action or dying in the committee,” receiving action on the Senate floor,” and “becoming law.” The substantive significance of this influence varies. Holding all other variables constant, a unit increase in the female sponsorship on a pro-women bill during a Democratic-controlled session is associated with a 0.151 probability increase that a bill will “receive no action or die in committee,” a 0.020 probability decrease a bill will “receive action on the Senate floor,” and a 0.116 probability decrease in a bill “becoming law.” Thus, the defensive backlash implied to exist within Democratic sessions appears most prevalent when bills are initially introduced, where bills are blocked before they have a chance to begin the legislative process.

In comparison, under Republican-controlled sessions, the influence of female sponsorship on a pro-women bill’s legislative trajectory meets a more stringent level of statistical significance, at \( p < 0.05 \). In addition, the marginal effect of female sponsorship is statistically significant across most categories of the legislative process, if one exempts increasing the

---

Table 11. Marginal effect of female sponsorship, Democratic sponsorship, and female representation on probability of pro-women bill issue advancement (n=231.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Final Bill Status (+1 Unit Change)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportion female sponsorship</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-0.295**</td>
<td>0.028**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Democratic sponsorship</td>
<td>0.286**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion female legislators</td>
<td>-0.582**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*\( p < 0.10 \), two-tailed; ** \( p < 0.05 \), two-tailed.
chances that a bill will “receive action in a Senate committee,” or “receive action on the Senate floor.” Overall, holding all other variables constant, a unit increase in the proportion of female sponsorship of pro-women bills in a Republican session decreases the chance that a bill will “receive no action or die in committee,” while increasing the chances that a bill will “receive action on the House floor,” “pass the House,” and “become law.” Much like in Democratic-controlled sessions, the substantive significance of female sponsorship’s marginal effect appears most prevalent in decreasing the probability that a bill will “receive no action or die in committee” by 0.295 and increasing the probability that a bill will “become law” by 0.172.

One may visually compare and contrast different partisan responses to increased female sponsorship in Figure 6 and Figure 7.

![Figure 6](image_url)

**Figure 6.** The marginal effect of increased female sponsorship during a Democratic-controlled session on the probability of a pro-women bill advancing farther in legislative process.
Figure 7. The marginal effect of increased female sponsorship during a Republican-controlled session on the probability of a pro-women bill advancing farther in legislative process.

Still, one may argue that although the marginal effect of female sponsorship on the trajectory of pro-women bills along partisan lines provides an interesting insight, it fails to offer an explanation for the seemingly counterintuitive nature of the defensive backlash being present during Democratic-controlled sessions, but opposite in its effect during Republican-controlled sessions. Absent of further analysis, one may initially posit that because of these trends, Republican legislators may simply be more receptive to greater proportions of female sponsorship on pro-women bills than Democratic legislators. However, by comparing the baseline probabilities of a pro-women bill’s legislative trajectory in Table 12, one may also interpret an alternate explanation for these partisan dynamics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Final Bill Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic control</td>
<td>0.272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican control</td>
<td>0.582</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12. Baseline probability of pro-women bill advancement in Democratic and Republican-controlled sessions.
NOTE: Model unable to calculate marginal effect of independent variables on probability a bill will “pass the Senate” due to limited number of data.
Overall, the baseline probabilities demonstrated in Table 12 indicate that holding all other variables constant, a pro-women bill is far more likely to be struck down earlier during the legislative process in a Republican-controlled session than in a Democratic session. While there is a 0.582 probability a pro-women bill will “receive no action or die in committee” during a Republican-controlled session, there is only a 0.272 probability that a pro-women bill will meet a similar fate during a Democratic-controlled session. Furthermore, it appears that holding all other variables constant, a pro-women bill is far less likely to “become law” in a Republican-controlled session than a Democratic-controlled session. The probability of a bill “becoming law” under Republican-control is only 0.135, whereas the probability of bill “becoming law” under Democratic control is nearly twice that probability, at 0.263. From these baseline probabilities, one may then infer that there are other factors affecting the presence of the defensive backlash only in Democratic sessions, since it appears that Democrats are more inclined to pass pro-women legislation than Republicans. It thus seems unlikely that increased female sponsorship would change this apparent support amongst legislators unless other factors are at play.

Discussion

It is important to note that although in the Democratic and Republican-controlled models, one could measure the marginal effect of female sponsorship, these models did not explicitly indicate which legislators were reacting positively or negatively in response to increased female sponsorship. Therefore, recalling the literature surrounding backlash theory and the concept of power dynamics related to the “status quo,” it is plausible that in Democratic-controlled sessions where a pro-women bill is introduced with a higher proportion of female sponsorship, it is not Democratic legislators who attempt to hinder the bill’s legislative progress, but Republicans.
Likewise, it is plausible that in Republican-controlled sessions where a pro-women bill is introduced with a higher proportion of female sponsorship, it is not Republican legislators who attempt to bolster the bill’s legislative progress, but Democrats.

Perhaps pro-women bills with high female sponsorship in Democratic-controlled sessions has a greater negative salience for Republicans in the minority, who could feel their power threatened not only ideologically along partisan lines, but gender lines as well—thus compelling Republican legislators to mobilize in opposition to the proposed pro-women legislation. Contrariwise, perhaps pro-women bills with high female sponsorship in Republican-controlled sessions have a positive salience for Democrats in the minority, who feel compelled to rally alongside their female colleagues, thus leading to increased mobilization. In this circumstance, Republicans may not feel as threatened and compelled to counter-mobilize against attempts to promote pro-women legislation in the earlier stages of the legislative process, since as the party in control they are in a position of power that allows them to block the legislation later in the process and prevent shifts to the status quo.

Conclusion

I began my research seeking to fill gaps in the existing literature surrounding potential backlash effects that could occur in response to women’s increased representation in state legislatures. I theorized that a potential backlash towards women’s increased descriptive representation would occur in two forms: an offensive backlash (wherein opponents would actively propose bills considered counterproductive to women’s progress) and a defensive backlash (wherein opponents would adopt a more subtle form of resistance by obstructing pro-women bills throughout the legislative process.) Based on these predictions, I divided my
research into two phases, in which “Phase One” would focus on potential offensive backlash effects and “Phase Two” would focus on potential defensive backlash effects.

For Phase One of my research, I hypothesized that an increase in the proportion of female legislators would result in: (a) an increase in pro-women’s legislation and (b) an increase in anti-women’s legislation. Overall, the results of my linear regression analysis indicate that as female representation increases, the number of pro-women bills introduced does not increase at a statistically significant level, thus failing to support the first of my offensive backlash hypotheses. Such findings are surprising as they fail to support previous research that suggests there is a positive relationship between women’s increased descriptive and substantive representation. However, my results also indicate that as female representation increases, the number of anti-women bills introduced increases as well at a statistically significant level of p<0.10. Such a relationship suggests that there is a slight offensive legislative backlash effect in response to women’s increased descriptive representation.

For Phase Two of my research, I hypothesized that as the proportion of female sponsorship on pro-women’s bills increases, such bills would be less likely to: (a) receive action in state House committees or on state House floors, (b) pass state Houses, (c) receive action in State Senate committees or on state Senate floors, (d) pass state Senates, or (e) be signed into law by a given state’s governor. The results of my ordered logistic analysis indicate that increased female sponsorship on pro-women bills decreases the probability a bill will advance farther in the legislative process during Democratic-controlled sessions, but increases the probability during Republican-controlled sessions. This relationship suggests that a defensive backlash in response to women’s increased descriptive representation depends upon partisan dynamics, but
does exist under certain circumstances in a way that supports my overarching defensive backlash hypotheses.

Therefore, my research contributes to the literature by offering empirical evidence that increased female representation results in a slight offensive backlash, as well as a partisan form of a defensive backlash specific to legislative sessions where the Democratic Party has a majority. Such findings will hopefully facilitate a better understanding of how male legislators respond to the increased presence of female legislators within state governments in a way that allows women to consider effective ways to attain or preserve political gains without unintentionally triggering backlash responses. I also hope that my research will lead researchers to examine whether other traditionally marginalized groups that have previously encountered offensive backlash responses—such as the Black, Latino, and LBGTQ+ communities—may also experience some form of a defensive backlash in response to increased descriptive representation.

In the future, I would like to expand the scope of my dataset in order to produce more robust results, particularly within the offensive backlash phase of my research. Preferably, in upcoming studies, I will be able to incorporate datasets from additional state Houses throughout the United States as well as extend the time frame of my research into the 2016 state legislative sessions. In terms of my research models, I would also like to further explore the partisan dynamic that appeared during the defensive backlash phase of my research. Although I briefly explored the idea that a defensive backlash effect towards increased descriptive representation primarily occurs based on the partisan minority’s perception of the status quo, it would be useful to empirically test this theory.
Additionally, I would be interested in examining whether the particular positions that women occupy within a given state legislature have any effect upon legislative backlash responses. For example, it would be useful to explore whether increasing numbers of female legislators who hold key positions of authority such as Speaker of the House or committee chairs are more of a help or a hindrance towards women’s political gains. One could easily conceive that having descriptive representation in areas that allow women to more easily set the agenda may combat potential backlash effects. However, the ascension of women to such powerful positions may also trigger even more severe legislative backlash, with male legislators perceiving this form of increased female leadership as an even greater threat to the status quo.

This potential negative impact associated with women’s attainment of higher level political positions leads me to examine the final area where I would like to expand my research. Given recent discussion surrounding how Secretary Hillary Clinton’s defeat during the 2016 presidential election was in many ways a backlash response to Clinton’s female identity (Bush, 2016), I would be interested in adapting my research model to analyze legislative backlash effects on a federal level. I would be especially curious to examine whether forms of backlash towards women’s increased descriptive representation vary from the state to federal level, and if so, how such differences may occur.
References


Appendix A: Standards for Coding Bills

The schema that I used for coding bills as pro- or anti-women based on standards set by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) is provided below. Bills are categorized based on the primary policy area that they fall under.
TYPES OF WOMEN’S LEGISLATION

EMPLOYMENT AND EARNINGS
Establishment/ expansion of:
- Paid family leave: ................................................................. PRO
- Paid maternity leave: .................................................. PRO
Adjustments to achieve pay equity/bridge gender wage gap: ................................................. PRO

POVERTY AND OPPORTUNITY
Increased funding for:
- Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) services................................................................. PRO
- Commissions on Minority and Women’s Businesses......................................................... PRO
Increased penalties for:
- Child support violations: ...................................................................................... PRO

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING
Increased/required medical insurance coverage/funding for:
- Breast cancer.............................................................. PRO
- Breast reproduction surgery....................................................... PRO
- Cervical cancer................................................................. PRO
- Osteoporosis...................................................................... PRO
- Mammograms................................................................. PRO
- Pap smears....................................................................... PRO
- Prenatal care................................................................ PRO
- Midwifery....................................................................... PRO
- Postpartum depression........................................................ PRO
- Women’s health (general).................................................... PRO

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS
Changes to abortion services that:
- Ban partial-birth abortions.............................................................. ANTI
- Establish a waiting period............................................................ ANTI
- Allow only a physician to perform procedures.................................................. ANTI
- Require mandatory parental consent or notification.............................................. ANTI
- Require facilities to match standards of ambulatory surgical centers................. ANTI
- Require mandatory ultrasounds...................................................................... ANTI
Increased/required medical insurance coverage/funding for:
- Contraceptives..................................................................... PRO
- Reproductive health services............................................................. PRO
- Infertility treatments................................................................. PRO
Decreased/exempt medical insurance coverage/funding for:
- Contraceptives..................................................................... ANTI
- Reproductive health services......................................................... ANTI
Infertility treatments: ...........................................................................................................................................ANTI

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
Appropriations for:
  Battered women’s shelters: ............................................................................................................................PRO
  Coalition against domestic violence: .................................................................................................................PRO
Compliance with:
  Family Violence Protection Order Enforcement Act: ........................................................................................PRO
  Protection from Abuse Act: ..............................................................................................................................PRO
Increased penalties for:
  Domestic violence: ...............................................................................................................................................PRO
  Rape: .................................................................................................................................................................PRO
  Sexual assault: ..................................................................................................................................................PRO
  Human trafficking: ............................................................................................................................................PRO
  Sexual harassment: .............................................................................................................................................PRO
  Stalking: ............................................................................................................................................................PRO

WORK & FAMILY
Mothers allowed to breastfeed in any public or private location: .................................................................PRO
Employers required/given tax incentives to provide subsidized childcare: ......................................................PRO

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION
Establishment of any commission/committee/office for women’s specific interests: ........................................PRO