

Understanding the U.S. Congress as a Gendered Institution: The Perspectives of Women Members

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As Chappell and Waylen (2013) emphasize, the “outcomes of interactions between the gendered formal and informal rules and norms...must be understood through in-depth context-specific analysis” (608). Doing so is difficult, and requires methodological approaches that can capture the nuances of institutions’ “design, operation, and effects” (613). Drawing upon in-depth, personal interviews with more than two-thirds of women members of the 114th Congress (2015-16) conducted by the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, we investigate how their experiences and behaviors illuminate and affect the gendering of the United States Congress. By moving beyond traditional measures of gender differences in congressional behavior (e.g. roll call votes, bill sponsorship), we contribute greater nuance, detail, and first-person insights into the ways in which Congress is a gendered institution. In this paper, we will focus specifically on women members’ perceptions of gender-based challenges and opportunities within Congress and concurrent navigation of the institution as gendered, raced, and partisan.