

**From Secretaries to Senators: The Changing Roles and
Experiences of Women on Capitol Hill**

Kelly Dittmar, Ph.D.
Rutgers University – Camden
Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers University – New Brunswick

Prepared for Presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association,
Chicago, IL, April 5-8, 2018.

When Leona Wells came to Congress in 1901, her first job in the U.S. Senate was to prepare an index of more than 50,000 pensions and other indemnities dating back to the Civil War (Zak 2016). Her role and influence grew as she worked for Senator Frances Warren on multiple committees, including becoming the Assistant Chief Clerk on the Committee on Appropriations (Zak 2016). Wells, recognized as the first woman congressional staffer, served on Senate staff for 29 years. In that time, more women joined congressional staff, but most held secretarial positions. It took 15 years from when Wells joined the Senate staff for a woman to be elected to congressional office, and no woman joined Wells as a U.S. Senator during her tenure on Capitol Hill.¹ Wells' presence and power in the male-dominated Senate raises an important point about women's representation and roles on Capitol Hill, demonstrating that the stories we tell about women's congressional power must not be limited to the women who have held elected positions. Instead, analyzing the historical evolution in the presence, power, and experiences of women congressional staff contributes to a more complete understanding of Congress as a gendered – and raced – institution.

In this paper, I draw from archival materials and interviews with high-level women congressional staff to discuss the changing numbers, roles, and experiences of women staff over time. By presenting data from women staffers' perspective, I am able to describe the ways in which they perceived and navigated gender during their congressional tenure, as well as emphasize the intersections of gender and race. To date, only two studies have provided over-time analyses of women staff (Pierce 2014) or black staff (Jones 2017). Both are limited in the period studied and the expanse of focus, and neither take full advantage of the potential for intersectional analysis of gender and race in the historical and current representation of women congressional staff. This analysis illuminates how these forces have functioned simultaneously in Congress to influence the allocation

of power and influence, as well as shape individual actors' experiences, advancement, and perceived rewards of service.

The obscurity of studies of women congressional staff specifically, and congressional staff more generally, can be attributed in large part to the difficulty of acquiring access and data. But the value of studying congressional staff is enormous. Recognized by most as the force that keeps Congress moving, congressional staff are key players in every aspect of institutional function and outcomes. As such, they both experience and contribute to the gender and race dynamics of the institution of Congress. Without analyzing these key institutional actors, our collective understanding of Congress – and the gender and race dynamics therein – is, at best, incomplete and, at worst, inaccurate.

The Growth and Role of Congressional Staff

The dearth of research on congressional professionals stands in stark contrast to the increased professionalization of the nation's top legislative institution. The “ever-increasing complexity of governing,” as the national policy agenda has become larger and more complicated, has required members of Congress to hire specialists able to assist them in navigating the new political realities of effective representation (Romzek and Utter 1997, 1251; see also Polsby 1969). The Legislative Reorganization Acts of 1946 and 1970 both increased manpower and encouraged specialization among staff and members, helping them to meet mounting legislative demands. While the numbers of authorized and hired staff on committees and in personal offices largely grew through the 1970s, the size of congressional staff has varied since then. By 1995, the average personal staff was between 12 and 18 in the House and 30 and 50 in the Senate (CMF 1995). However, Republican reforms to reduce the size of government made in 1995 cut House staff levels by 33% and Senate staff levels by 15% (Romzek and Utter 1997, 1257). As a result, the congressional work force has been reduced in size over the past two decades (Brookings 2017).

Despite this reduction, committee and personal staff in the House and Senate still represent a workforce of over 13,000 individuals, outnumbering members by a ratio of 26 to 1 (Brookings 2017).² Moreover, staff qualifications have increased as the complexity of the legislative agenda and process has grown (Romzek 2000).

Much legislative literature describes the principal-agent relationship between members and staff as one characterized most explicitly by staff loyalty and deference to their member (Bell and Rosenthal 2003; Finer 1978; DeGregorio 1988; 1994; Hammond 1996; Malbin 1980; Romzek 2000). Others identify the potential for staff influence and leadership that adheres to these prevailing norms, describing staff as “influence extenders” for officeholders (DeGregorio 1988) whose autonomy increases with seniority and trust from the member (Hammond 1996; Romzek 2000). Bell and Rosenthal (2003) go further to argue that “control by principals may be less than certain” in Congress, citing the demands on member time as a cause for increased delegation (67). Members’ time constraints also contribute to decreased accountability and potentially greater autonomy among staff members, especially committee staff that are further removed from individual members and report to multiple principals (Bell and Rosenthal 2003; Romzek 2000; Romzek and Utter 1997). Moreover, member reliance on staff for information and expertise fosters opportunities for influence (Hammond 1996; Sabatier and Whiteman 1985; Whiteman 1995). As one staffer reported to Romzek (2000), “We’re basically entrepreneurs. ...[Our] member tells us where they want to go, but lets us do the driving” (429). Thus, while there is a tension between staff members’ autonomy and deference to their member (Romzek and Utter 1996; 1997), their capacity to meet member goals and make distinct contributions are not mutually exclusive. More accurately, congressional staff have the potential for “delegated autonomy,” whereby their independent influence is “substantial but qualified” (Romzek and Utter 1997, 1251).

Congress as a Gendered and Raced Institution

The influence of staff is not limited to policy deliberation or outcomes. Scholars must recognize the ways in which congressional staff both navigate and influence the gender power dynamics of the institution. Scholarship that more fully recognizes the ways in which all actors – staff and legislators alike – contribute to the gendering, and re-gendering, of political institutions will illuminate the implications of professionalization on institutional gender dynamics.

Gender shapes the behavior and experiences of all actors within legislative institutions. Women, in particular, are expected to adhere to “mutually exclusive scripts” of their gender and masculinized legislative roles, “managing” their femininity in the process to avoid the “collision of scripts” that brings unwanted attention to and concern about their “other”-ness (Puwar 2004, 93-97). The privileging of masculine styles of leadership and legislative strategy in American legislatures is documented within existing scholarship (Kathlene 1994; Kenney 1996; Rosenthal 1998). This privileging can create overt barriers to power, but women also confront implicit bias in legislative institutions that can restrict access to influence (see Brown 2014; Kathlene 1989, 1994; Thomas 1994 for evidence at the state legislative level). More recent work on women in the 114th Congress demonstrates that gender-based hurdles, including greater skepticism of women’s qualifications to serve, persist for women members, even if less severe than the challenges they faced historically or less burdensome than those they confront on the campaign trail (Dittmar, Sanbonmatsu, and Carroll 2016). Clearing hurdles to inclusion and power requires more than women’s adaptation to masculine norms; women’s non-conformity to established institutional rules, processes, and priorities is a key strategy to disrupting prevailing gender power dynamics. Multiple studies have highlighted how congresswomen differ from their male counterparts in motivation and behavior, from prioritizing women’s issues to expressing a sense of responsibility to act as surrogate representatives for women (Dittmar, Carroll, and Sanbonmatsu 2017; Dodson 2006; Hawkeworth et al. 2000; Reingold 2008; Swers 2002). In many cases, women’s different approaches are informed by the ways in which their

life experiences are distinct from the majority of men with whom they serve (Dittmar, Carroll, and Sanbonmatsu 2017).³ Together, these findings confirm that “neither legislative priorities nor the standard operating procedures of legislative institutions are either gender inclusive or gender neutral” (Hawkesworth 2003, 530).

Hawkesworth’s (2003) influential work on the “race-gendering” of Congress illustrates how “the production of difference, political asymmetries, and social hierarchies that simultaneously create the dominant and the subordinate” occurs in Congress and shapes the experiences and behaviors of women of color members in distinct ways (531). Dittmar, Carroll, and Sanbonmatsu (2017) report on the distinct perspectives, experiences, and influence of women of color in the 114th Congress, providing a more recent reminder of the simultaneous functioning of the U.S. Congress as a gendered and raced institution. Jones (2017) applies this framework to the study of congressional staff, demonstrating that race and gender power dynamics of congressional institutions also inform the orientations and actions of legislative professionals. Focusing most on race as an organizing feature of the congressional workplace, Jones’ (2017) work demonstrates that institutional dynamics operate below the principal level. Moreover, the institutional experiences of members and staff, like those of candidates and practitioners, often overlap – from facing structural sites of incompatibility to navigating established norms as “other” within a majority male, and majority white, institution. Thus, while little scholarship examines how the gendering and race-gendering of Congress informs the experiences and behavior of female staff specifically, they – as institutional actors and performers – are not immune from the prevailing privileging of masculinity or whiteness in the ways in which the institution is structured, operates, and distributes power.

Gender, Race, and Congressional Staff

The literature on gender, race, and congressional staff is extremely limited. Jones’ (2017) dissertation is one of the few large-scale investigations into how the racial power dynamics on

Capitol Hill affect the experiences of staffers. There is only slightly more scholarship that investigates gender and congressional staff. Early investigations analyzed gender differences in professional representation with limited analysis of institutional implications (Hammond 1973; Tabakman 2009; Friedman and Nakamura 1991; Johannes 1984). Even recent work from Wilson and Carlos (2014) focuses on the presence of women on congressional staffs, finding a positive relationship between women members and hiring women staff.

In their 1996 book on women in Congress, Herbert and Karen Foerstel dedicate a chapter to women congressional staff, providing one of the few historical overviews of women's presence, power, and influence at the professional level. They describe hurdles confronted by women staff, including pay inequity and sexual harassment, but present an optimistic forecast for women's progress at the staff level. Below, I evaluate the accuracy of that forecast more than two decades after its publication. Nearly twenty years after Foerstel and Foerstel (1996) published their chapter, Rachel Pierce (2014) completed a dissertation that took a more in-depth look at the history of women and feminism on Capitol Hill. While her work focuses on the period between 1960s and 1980s, Pierce's work provides some of the first documented insights into women's staff roles, advancement, and even activism during a time of significant institutional – and cultural – change. Like Jones (2017), Pierce (2014) relies on first-person insights from women staff, as well as archival evidence that had largely been untapped in scholarship until this point.

Before Pierce (2014), Bell and Rosenthal (2003) conducted one of the only studies that moved beyond analyzing women's descriptive representation on congressional staffs to identify the contexts under which their passive, or descriptive, representation translates into active, or substantive representation of women through their professional behavior and influence. As political professionals who experience and navigate the gendered institution of Congress, they demonstrate that women staff have the capacity for substantive representation that varies from their male

counterparts (Bell and Rosenthal 2003). This capacity for active representation is captured in Pierce's (2014) findings about feminist activism among congressional staffers, as well as in some of the interviews discussed in this paper. However, the analysis that follows serves as an important foundation for future evaluations of the substantive impact of gender and racial diversity on congressional staffs. By assessing the changing roles, presence, and experiences of women on Capitol Hill, I demonstrate both opportunities and constraints on the interest, expertise, motivation, status, and access to resources that Bell and Rosenthal (2003) deem necessary for active representation among women congressional staffers.

METHODOLOGY

In concluding his oral history with former staffer Christine McCreary, Senate Historian Don Ritchie noted of her four decades in Congress, "You've had quite a career here on Capitol Hill." McCreary responded, "Yes, I have. I don't talk about it unless a person wants to discuss it. Otherwise I don't say much about it." McCreary's statement reveals how easily the voices, stories, and roles of congressional staffers are silenced in both historical and contemporary analyses of Congress. Congressional staff, accustomed to keeping a low profile, have often been reluctant to speak openly about their tenure on Capitol Hill, especially if the focus is on them over the members for whom they worked. However, the value of their first-person insights is enormous and the danger of evaluating gender and racial dynamics on Capitol Hill without their perspectives is great.

In this paper, I rely on interviews with 64 women congressional staffers who worked on Capitol Hill in various roles – from both personal and committee offices – from as early as 1974 until 2018. These interviews represent the first phase of my research on women congressional staff, in which I focus on women in senior leadership roles. The highest positions of my female interviewees were Chief of Staff (29), Staff Director (10), Deputy Chief of Staff or Staff Director (5), Senior Advisor/Aide/Counsel (6), Legislative Director (5), and Communications Director (3). The

remaining six staffers ranged in positions from Secretary of the Senate to committee counsel, floor director, or floor assistant. Selecting interview subjects at high levels of congressional leadership constrains the pool, as well as the racial and partisan diversity of that pool; the majority of my interviews were with women working in Democratic offices (44) and 49 of my interview subjects were white. Sadly, this racial representation is representative of the dearth of women of color in high levels of congressional leadership in the past four decades.

Recognizing the seniority of positions that these women held is also important to interpreting my findings, as the experiences and access to power is distinct for staffers across the hierarchy of staff positions in Congress. Importantly, many of the women I interviewed held less senior positions during their tenure on Capitol Hill. The average tenure on the Hill among all of my interview subjects was 14 years.

Semi-structured interviews ranged from 26 to 90 minutes, with an average length of 56 minutes per interview. The interviews were generally separated into three areas of focus. First, I asked each woman to discuss their path to Capitol Hill and general experiences and trajectory as a congressional staffer, including their various roles, relationship with members, and transition to work outside of Congress. I then asked specifically about their experiences *as women* and *as women of color* on Capitol Hill, querying subjects about challenges, opportunities, and perceptions of influence of their identities – and the influence of staff diversity more generally – on office environment and outcomes. Finally, I included some questions about their perceptions of institutional change, including changes in the role orientation and autonomy of congressional staff. The findings reported below focus on my questions that asked specifically about gender and race dynamics on Capitol Hill.

Finally, in addition to these interviews, I analyzed 54 oral histories from women congressional staffers collected from the Senate and House Historians' Offices, as well as oral history archives for individual U.S. Senators.⁴ Detailed analyses of these oral histories are not

included in this paper, but evidence from these archival materials provide important historical context for understanding the degree to which my interview subjects' experiences denote progress or stasis in the status of women on Capitol Hill.

FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Presence of Women

With notable exceptions like Leona Wells, Mary Jean Simpson, Eileen Galloway, and at least 18 women who served as Senate chiefs of staff between 1948 and 1960,⁵ the many women working in Congress through the 1960s were relegated to, or at least began their service in, secretarial roles. Still, while there are no clear counts available, the perception among staff at the time and congressional historians today is that women made up a significant proportion of congressional staff during the same period. Especially before the increased professionalization of congressional staffs in the latter portion of the 20th century, women held key secretarial roles in which they were often the primary point of support for the members for whom they worked. As Pierce (2014) writes, "Serving as office helpmeets to the nation's most powerful men, female staffers could end up running the offices of the greatest legislative body in the world" (5). With greater professionalization came greater role segregation on Capitol Hill, where newly defined policy or "professional" positions were allocated to men.

Oral histories from women staff serving in the 1960s provide a glimpse into the constrained environment for women congressional staff at the time. While women could advance from simply clerical roles, they were frequently assigned to case work and constituent correspondence instead of serving as policy aides. Senate staffer Jane Fenderson Cabot explains, "When I came in as a research assistant in 1965, that was probably among the top professional spots for a woman. The case workers were women. The person who supervised them was a man, and that was just a given" (17). Johannes (1994) provides empirical support for this claim. Drawing from the 1977 *Congressional Staff*

Directory and the House Commission on Administrative Review's work in the same year, he finds that women were 77% of Senate and 85% of House caseworkers at the time (72). Johannes (1994) reports that women were 92% of all DC-based caseworkers in the U.S. House in 1977, with only clerical work being more female-dominated (71). Beverly LaHage, a staffer to Senator Ted Kennedy, talked about her own case work responsibilities as "professional," but added that in 1966, "When I was working on legislative stuff, there was a definite ceiling. I mean, women didn't get to be the lead on any major legislation at all. Local legislation, maybe, but not if it became a major issue" (7). Explaining why this ceiling existed, LaHage said, "It was hard for men to envision a woman doing the strategic legislative planning and negotiating the nitty-gritty. I think that men didn't see women that way" (6). For the select women who did serve in top staff roles at or before this time, their path to power was distinct from their male counterparts. Former staffer Susan Webb Hammond wrote in her 1973 dissertation on congressional staff, "Women AAs [administrative assistants] have often come to that position through the secretarial ladder. No men AAs have this history" (quoted in Pierce 2014, 64).⁶

Kennedy staffer Anne Strauss discussed her own promotion to legislative correspondent in 1971 or 1972 as pathbreaking: "That was the *highest* job a woman could aspire to in the Kennedy office. I was the first one to get that job, and it took me ten years" (4). Strauss credits her own promotion, as well as the increased opportunities for women to take on professional staff roles in the 1970s, to the pressure applied by the women's movement. Asked about a tipping point for progress, Strauss explained, "It didn't begin to grate until the '70s, because at that point the women's movement was just getting going. It was a little slow to come to the Hill, needless to say" (7). But when it did come, it had significant effects on women's power and influence on Capitol Hill (Pierce 2014). Pierce (2014) describes the pressure that feminist activism placed on congressmen, particularly Democrats, to hire more women as a reflection of their support and valuation of

women's empowerment (58). For example, within a decade of Strauss earning professional credentials in the Kennedy office, Ranny Cooper became Kennedy's first woman chief of staff. House committee staffer Tish Schwartz, who began working on the Hill in 1969, told the House historian's office, "The opportunities, I saw them in the '80s. You could really see the change taking place in women, knowing that they didn't have to be stuck in a clerical support job" (20).

Friedman and Nakamura (1991) lend data to Schwartz's claim, finding that the number of women in professional positions on Senate committee staffs increased by 17 percentage points (from 38% to 55%) between 1977 and 1987 (413). Still, by 1987, 81% of clerical positions on Senate committee staffs were held by women and women occupied just 19% of "top positions" – staff director, minority staff director, chief clerk, or assistant to chair (414).

While these disparities persisted, women's advancement was notable over the course of the decade. Asked about her perception of sexism on Capitol Hill, Senate staffer Charlene Sturbitts explained,

I think it was that the Senate really started to change, I think that there were more female professionals on the Hill, and people got used to dealing with them. In fact, it was amazing how quickly it did change, and I think that's true in society in general, in terms of the number of women being in positions of responsibility. So I think by at least the mid-1980s, there didn't seem to be any of that left; it was not overt, it wasn't acceptable. There probably was some of it still, but it wasn't apparent.

Sturbitts' optimistic view of the shift in not only women staffers' positional power, but also in the gendered culture of the U.S. Senate, may be overstated. But her recognition of shifting gender power dynamics on Capitol Hill is important to putting the effects of 1992's "Year of the Woman" in a broader and more complete historical context. After that year's election, the number of women in Congress nearly doubled and the number of women in the Senate increased from three to seven

(CAWP n.d.). It is at this time that the Congressional Management Foundation also provided some of the first comprehensive data on women's representation among congressional staff. They found that women held over three-quarters of clerical positions, 43.7% of policy positions, and 41.7% of leadership positions in the U.S. House in 1992; and 74.5% of clerical positions, 40.6% of policy positions, and one-third of leadership positions in the U.S. Senate in 1993 (CMF 1993, 1994).⁷ Foerstel and Foerstel (1996) calculate that, in 1993, women represented 59.7% and 60.5% of personal office staffers in the U.S. Senate and House, respectively (145).

Over two decades later, a Legistorm analysis of 15,700 DC congressional staff showed that women were just about half of all personal office staffers in both the House and Senate (Stamm 2015). The only position in which women held majority representation was among staff assistants – the most clerical role included, and women were least represented among House (33.3%) and Senate (26.9%) chiefs of staff in 2013. Numbers have not shifted much since then, with an analysis of 2016 staff directories revealing that women comprised about 45% of House staff in personal offices (Burgat 2017). Consistent with previous findings, strong majorities of schedulers (83%) and office managers (95%) were women, while women represented just about one-third of House chiefs of staff or legislative directors (Burgat 2017).

Women of Color

Illuminating the dearth of intersectional research on congressional staff, hardly any counts of congressional staff attempted to measure *both* race and gender. In fact, the data on racial and ethnic representation among congressional staff is itself incredibly sparse. Just last year, in June 2017, the Senate Democrats released their first public report on staff diversity. It found that 32% of Democratic staffers in the U.S. Senate identify as “non-Caucasian” (O’Keefe 2017); 13% of Senate Democratic staffers identified as African American, 10% identified as Latino, 8% identified as Asian-Pacific Islander; 4% identified as Native American, and 3% identified as being of Middle

Eastern/North African descent.⁸ Two years earlier, a study by the Joint Center for Political Economic Studies found just 24 people of color among the 336 Senate staff positions (7.1%) they analyzed across parties – chief of staff, legislative director, communications director, and committee staff director (Joint Center 2017). Broader surveys of House staff in 2009 show higher levels of representation for black and Hispanic staff, but similar disparities at the highest levels of staff leadership.⁹ Perhaps even more importantly, the numbers in the House mask the concentration of staffers of color, especially in top leadership roles, in member of color offices.

In 1947, Juanita Barbee became the first black woman hired to work for a white member of the U.S. House – Representative Helen Gahagan Douglas (D-CA) (Pierce 2014, 27). According to Pierce (2014), just two other black secretaries were employed in the House before her and both worked for black legislators (27). In the Senate, the first black woman was hired as a secretary in 1949 by Senator Paul Douglas (D-IL).¹⁰ At that time, however, Capitol Hill remained segregated, at least unofficially, in the roles held by staff of color and in the spaces in which they were welcomed. Describing the period before and through the 1950s, Pierce (2014) writes, “Most persons of color were concentrated in basements and behind closed doors, virtually invisible to most white employees and legislators” (30). It was a black woman staffer, Christine McCreary, who was among the first to challenge the racial segregation in the Senate staff cafeteria. She described her experience in an oral history:

There were problems. I'd come out of the restaurant and all of the black people that worked in the Senate were people who worked on the custodial staff and were mail carriers. They were all lined up in the hall out there just to see me. Well, I felt like two cents, because I wasn't used to that. I didn't know what to say or do. And then of course there were some snide remarks, and all that kind of foolishness. I would just keep on going. I wouldn't even

bother to stop and answer that. But you get through that too. It was just a lonesome time.

(11)

By the 1970s, Muriel Morisey – a senior legislative assistant for Representative Shirley Chisholm (D-NY), described the difference in her perceptions of racial versus gender progress on the Hill: “I’ve had the experience as a black person going into many environments and looking around the room and thinking, ‘I’m the only black person here.’ I don’t remember getting to work on the Hill and looking around and thinking, aren’t there any other women here? There were” (14-15). It would have been even rarer for Morisey to see other women of color, especially in legislative positions and particularly working for white members, at that time – and the numbers remain low today. In my interview with Nichole Francis, she recalled being just one of two black women serving as a chief of staff in a non-minority House member office as recently as 2010. It was not until 2002 when Joyce Brayboy became the first woman of color and the first African American to head the House Chiefs of Staff Association. This relatively recent history and persistent disparity in power for women of color necessitates an analysis of women’s experiences on Capitol Hill with an intersectional lens, which is what I begin here.

Experience of Women on Capitol Hill

First, Only, and Lonely?

Many of the high-level women staffers that I interviewed described the regularity with which they were the first or only women in a position, at a decision-making table, or in particular meeting rooms on Capitol Hill. They were conscious of their singularity, but frequently referenced their ability to move beyond it. As former House chief of staff Rochelle Dornatt told me, “I was never afraid of putting myself out there and trying for the next level, but I was always cognizant that the men around me were very tight. ...I was outside of the loop.” Michelle Jawando, former Chief Counsel to Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), told me, “Nine times out of ten the person that

you're gonna interact with is a white male. It's not gonna be someone who looks like me and I think you're acutely aware of it.” When asked about the challenges of being a black woman staffer in Congress, Nichole Francis told me of the institution, “I definitely felt that it was this was a system that was not open to us,” but added, “I was not going to be deterred.”

As black women, Jawando and Francis were distinctly aware that they navigated white and male-dominated spaces. Jawando explained, “Most people don’t see people who look like me - black women - in the most senior legal role for a member of the Senate.” That meant that the power she had – or, as she described, the “rarified air” she breathed in a leadership role – was often not assumed by those with whom she interacted, shaping not only her experiences, but also the strategies she had to employ to assert that power. Latina House chief of staff Gloria Montañó Greene shared a similar experience, noting, “Sometimes I would go into the meeting and be the only Latina or person of color and they would be like, ‘Are you in the right place?’” She learned to lead with her title to heed off these doubts, something that would not have otherwise been her approach.

Interestingly, it is due to their stark underrepresentation that women of color in congressional staff leadership have experienced this type of hypervisibility – or heightened attention to their difference. Multiple women of color described another form of hypervisibility in their interviews with me, one in which they are singled out as the expert on all issues associated with their racial or ethnic communities. Long-time Senate staff director and chief counsel Stephanie Monroe, who spent most of her time on the Hill working as a Republican committee staffer, explained, “I was expected to be the women’s expert, or the Senator had a question about black people [so] they would ask me [and] assume I speak for all black people.” When she was working on welfare on reform in the 1990s, Monroe felt “all eyes were on me because you’re the black woman and you’re conservative.” She felt the burden to dispel myths (“You know, not all African-Americans are on welfare ...and it is not even the majority of people on welfare are African-American”) and point out

offensive or inaccurate language, while simultaneously fearing “you’re going to be fired” for pointing out members’ inappropriateness. Monroe pointed to her success in bringing diverse voices of people on welfare into the debate and challenging the myths held by many in her own party as a major accomplishment during her tenure on Capitol Hill, despite the challenges it presented at the time.

Denise Desiderio, former deputy staff director to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, shared a similar experience. When the committee was debating whether or not to take on the Washington Redskins name, “it’s almost like you kind of ended up having a spotlight when you enter a room to talk about that particular issue,” not only because of her Native American identity, but also because “a lot of the conversations were very male-dominated and you are the female Indian in the room.” Former Senate staffer Maria Meier, who led the Senate Democrats’ diversity initiative, described both the privilege and pressure of being expected to speak for multiple constituencies. She said, “I think this happens if you’re a woman, if you’re a person of color, you become the savior for the whole community.” Similarly, Michele Jawando expressed, “People expect you to figure this out. ...I felt like...I had a special responsibility to figure this out.”

These pressures are also paired with a more personal sense of loneliness for women of color. Former Senate committee counsel Esther Olavarria, a Latina, explained, “My background was very, very different from the background of most of the people that I worked with.” While that brought enormous value to the work her committee did, it also brought recognition that “sometimes [my background] would be so different that you didn’t even want to...you couldn’t even bring up yours because you knew that they would never be able to relate to that.” Patricia Akiyama, who served as the first Asian American woman chief of staff in the Senate (1995-1999), told me, “I felt very out of place [on Capitol Hill],” adding, “In many ways that was [a] very isolating experience because I really didn’t feel like I had anybody I could talk to about being Asian-American on Capitol Hill and what that was like.” For Akiyama, this was among her motivations to move back to the West Coast after

six years in Washington, DC, but for most of the women of color who described this consciousness of difference, the pressures of being first or only were neither new nor a deterrent to continuing their congressional service. Denise Desiderio explained that as a person with a tribal background, she's had to educate people her whole life, just as she did on Capitol Hill. Another Latina staffer told me, "Even if I felt slighted, I wouldn't let it get to me." And Gloria Montaña Greene told me that the dearth of Latinas in leadership roles did not make her consider leaving; instead, she said, "If anything, I think it really fueled the other part of the work that you could do on your personal time, right?" That other work included acting as a mentor and resource to other minority and women staffers, and vouching for them when opportunities arise. The opportunity to open congressional doors for others, especially individuals from groups underrepresented on Capitol Hill, was described by many of the women I interviewed as a reward of service – and one that appeared to turn what could be a challenge of identity into an opportunity to promote institutional change.

Challenges in a Gendered and Raced Institution

Meritocracy and Derivative Power

After discussing their paths to Capitol Hill, one of the first questions I posed to each of my interview subjects was, "Are there any challenges you faced or hurdles you experienced as a congressional staffer that you felt were rooted in your race/ethnicity, gender, and/or the intersection of those identities?"¹¹ In response, many of the women I interviewed talked about personal experiences that were – overall – positive, discounting the degree to which gender or racial biases negatively affected them. Across party lines, women described Capitol Hill as a meritocracy for staff, and added that the capacity to advance based on merits of hard – and good – work creates opportunities for groups that might otherwise be marginalized in politics or other industries. Importantly, however, most of the women expressing this view had reached the pinnacle of advancement during their tenure on the Hill – making it much more likely that they would view the

potential for advancement positively – and just one of the women describing Congress as a meritocracy was a woman of color.

These women were aware of the privileged positions they held in staff leadership, and how that may have prevented negative experiences tied to gender or race. In at least ten interviews, high-level women staffers described how their positive experience was a function of the empowerment provided them by the members for whom they worked. One former chief of staff explained, “You get your power from who you work for,” noting that when a member gives their staff respect, that staff gets the same respect from others who will seek to maintain a positive relationship with the member. As former House chief of staff Kathryn Lehman told me, “Because you reflect your boss, people ...don’t treat you with respect at their own peril.” Melody Barnes, chief counsel for Senator Kennedy, said, “When you walked in a room people understood that you were there and you were there with his support and with his backing. ... So that was empowering.” She added that those same people “didn’t want to incur the wrath of [Senator Kennedy].” Another House chief noted, “It was not in anybody’s interest to diminish me.” Finally, in her oral history about her time working for Senator Daniel Inouye (D-AK), Jennifer Sabas detailed a conversation she had with the Senator about engaging with military leaders on the Senator’s behalf:

[Senator Inouye] tells me, “Okay, you’re my chief. When the new commander of the Pacific, PACOM, comes to town, I want you to reach out on my behalf as the first emissary, because how they treat you is going to be indicative of how they’re going to be diplomatically in the region. If they cast you off as a girl, if they don’t take you seriously, that’s a problem and I want to know it.”

These examples – and this concept – of derivative power given to and claimed by women staff illuminates the importance of the member-staff relationship to women’s power and experience, as

well as the complexity of understanding gender and race within a transactional institution like Congress.

Overt Discrimination & Harassment

Few of the women cited above – or any of the women I spoke with – claimed that there were *no* challenges for women on Capitol Hill. Instead, just as they were very aware of the rarity of their representation in leadership roles, the women staffers I interviewed and those who shared their experiences in oral histories described multiple sites in which their experiences differed *as women* and *as women of color*. Some of these experiences were of overt discrimination, such as women’s discussion of pay inequity. House committee staffer Tish Schwartz told a story about confronting her male committee staff director about pay inequity in the mid 1970s:

He pretty much looked me right in the eye, and he said, “You’re married, right?” And I said, “Yes.” “Your husband has a salary, you don’t need to worry about it. You make enough.”

And I walked out. I was, like, “I can’t believe this.”

Her experience helps to explain the findings of a 1975 report on sexism in the U.S. Senate, which found gender disparities in salary at every level of staff employment but chief of staff (Capitol Hill Women’s Political Caucus 1975). But these disparities did not end as women took on more professional roles in Congress. In 1993 and 1994 reports, the Congressional Management Foundation found that women in the House and Senate faced a “salary ceiling” of \$40,000, above which the number of women staff became scarce. By 2015, the Legistorm analysis found little evidence of a gender wage gap among House staffers, but a wage deficit for women staff (by about 3.19 percent) in the Senate (Stamm 2015).

Recent attention to sexual harassment on Capitol Hill was not surprising to the women I interviewed, or invisible in the oral histories of women who held congressional staff positions over

the past 70 years. In her oral history, Dorothea G. Scott laughed over stories about Senator Alben Barkley, who served in the Senate until 1956:

I've forgotten who the girl was but she was a newspaper woman, and she had written an article about him flirting with the girls. So he found her one day and she was just about to get in a phone booth to call in a story. He went in the phone booth and kissed her! [laughs]

Barkley also targeted a secretary in Scott's Senate office:

Senator Barkley came in and started patting Rose Anne's arm, from her hand up to her wrist and gradually up the length of her arm. Her eyes got bigger and bigger as he progressed, and Mr. Johnston burst out laughing!

Scott laughed again while telling another story about Senator Lyndon B. Johnson, who joked that his secretary should "throw a little sex around" to stall someone who was waiting to meet with him.

Scott's reaction to these instances should not be assumed to denote approval of this type of behavior, but instead reflects the degree of acceptance that appears to have shaped women staff's perceptions of sexual harassment on Capitol Hill. Even during my interviews with women in the past year, they described a shift in how they viewed men's behaviors during their time in Congress. While at least five women shared explicit stories of sexual harassment and abuse they experienced, most of the women I asked about sexual harassment on Capitol Hill easily pointed to "flirtatious," "handsy," or "creepy" men that from whom they knew to stay away, but few counted these examples as a threat. Some noted that it was just a function of generational differences, and believed that some men's comments about their appearance or gender was never meant to cause harm. But former House chief of staff Clare Coleman described the shift in her own perceptions in the midst of today's #MeToo movement:

At the time I just thought of them as dirty old men. ...But [I've been] really struck...talking to women of how much we normalize.It's really been other women in conversation with

me saying, “Did you just hear yourself? Did you just hear yourself say that you wouldn’t park in the garage and would look for street parking even late at night so that you wouldn’t [be subject to harassment by the parking garage attendant]?” And I’m like, “Yeah, that’s what I did.”

Sheila Burke, former Secretary of the Senate and Senate chief of staff, told me that she was never the subject of harassment, but did imply that what “counted” as harassment has changed over time. She said, “There were times when, you know, [there were] behaviors that now I would tell my own daughters not to tolerate.” Burke also joined many of the women I interviewed in pointing to her positional power as a deterrent to abusers. Drawing from her own experience, Rochelle Dornatt explained, “The derivative power you might get from your boss allows you to sort of use that against any would-be harassers.”

Less Overt Barriers

Historically and even in recent years, the types of discrimination women felt were not always as overt, especially in posing hurdles to women’s advancement. One former chief of staff described the “old boys’ network” in one of the first offices she worked in as a legislative assistant in the early 1990s:

[The Senator] did play squash with the men in his office and - when I look back on it now - ...he’d go to the ballgame with the guys in the office. So there was some of that and, you know, we didn’t think about it as much then, right, because we didn’t have as much consciousness raised at that time, but when I think about now, yeah, sure, it was harder for all of the women in that office to rise to leadership levels because there was a guy’s thing going on there, right?

Sue Nelson, who served as a deputy staff director for two decades on the Senate Budget Committee, captured the nuanced effects of these informal networks among men. She told me, “I really felt like, for the most part, my expertise was appreciated and my opinions were taken into account.” But she

added, “I think probably discrimination was more just in that I wasn’t part of the club. Not that anyone was doing anything directly to hold me back, but just when you’re not part of the club and you don’t go to the golf games and you don’t have the same shared experiences in life, it’s just harder.”

In some offices, according to the women I interviewed, some male members of Congress – especially older men – have been uncomfortable with or unsure of bringing women into that “club,” particularly at the highest levels of leadership. For example, from the earliest days of women’s advancement to the level of chief of staff, there have been some members – and women staffers – concerned with external *perceptions* of impropriety due to the necessary closeness between a chief and her boss. The chief-member relationship requires physical closeness in the office, at meetings, and during travel; in addition to frequent communication at sometimes unlikely times like nights and weekends. A House staffer who only recently left Capitol Hill told me that she believes this is a concern that some congressmen still have, explaining, “I definitely think there is a fear of, you know, we need to go to a fundraiser, I want my chief of staff to drive me, I don't want to be seen alone with a woman. I 100% think that is actually like a huge thing.” Relatedly, she harbored her own fear that her advancement would be viewed skeptically: “I had a constant fear that people would think I was sleeping with my boss and that's how I got my job.” From my interviews, it is unclear just how widespread these concerns are among members or staff, though one staffer to older Republican men within the past decades shared, “I do think that there’s a lot of progress being made on that front.” The increased numbers of women chiefs, including among older, more prominent male members – e.g. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Senator John McCain – provides some support for this claim. Still, a number of interview subjects pointed to recent news about sexual harassment on Capitol Hill with some fear that it would cause some male members to think twice before selecting women for roles that would require such intimate and frequent interaction – whether as chief of

staff or even driver. As one former staffer told me, “Unfortunately that can hold a lot of women back in the opportunity that they have on the Hill.”

Not all hurdles to women’s advancement to leadership roles were based on member concerns of outside perceptions, however; some women described members’ concerns over their readiness for leadership roles. Sheila Burke, one of the most recognized women in staff leadership in the 1980s and 1990s, spoke with great admiration and respect for her former boss, Senator Bob Dole (R-KS). Still, despite the many opportunities he provided her, Burke shared that Dole was “cautious” in deciding whether or not to promote her to staff director in his leadership office. “I think Dole was concerned and voiced this as to whether or not I was going to be strong enough to be staff director in the leader’s office,” she explained, noting that his hesitancy was likely due to the combination of her age, gender, and specialized expertise. Over time, Burke said, Dole “became comfortable with my representing him.” His support made a difference with the rest of the staff, she added, who “had to adjust to a woman being the senior person.”

Concerns about women’s capacity to do the job are not unique to leadership roles on Capitol Hill, but – as in other institutions – they have significant effects on women’s experiences and behavior. Asked whether or not she felt the need to adapt her behavior to the male-dominated settings in which she was working, Burke responded, “Absolutely. You can't be the only woman in the room and not at times feel that people are questioning why you're in the room.” In one of her first jobs on Capitol Hill in the 1980s, Rochelle Dornatt felt, “I had to work twice as hard to be [viewed as] just as good as the guys.” She said, “I really did feel... like I always had to prove myself,” and added, “I didn’t want the guys to have any reason to point to me as a failure or assume that because I was a woman that I didn’t get it right.” She was not alone. Betsy Hawkings, who came to Congress in 1988 and stayed through 2015, told me, “I never felt that I was going to get ahead if I worked less hard than anybody else.” She went on to say, “I never thought it would be handed to

me,” spurring her to do good work that her boss could not ignore. Hawkings added, “I do think that that is still a dynamic among the women leaders that I know on the Hill. You know, they are among the most dynamic people you will ever meet and they do more and they know more and they know more people and they push themselves harder.” Other women I spoke with, including those with more recent tenures on Capitol Hill, backed up this claim and described their own efforts to prove themselves as qualified and capable of congressional staff leadership.

For women of color, that pressure felt distinct at the intersection of raced and gendered perceptions of who was best equipped for leadership roles. In her senior role in the U.S. Senate, Michelle Jawando explained, “I knew every single day I had to outwork almost everybody on my team.” Recognizing that those with whom she was engaging were unaccustomed to seeing a woman of color in her role, she knew then and knows now that “I don’t have the ability to walk in and not be prepared.” Maria Meier, who mentored diversity candidates for staff positions, agreed. She described her advice to minority applicants: “I was really blunt with people and I said...they didn’t have to be good at the first meeting; [these] candidates had to actually be better.” Nichole Francis, a black woman and former chief of staff, said, “There’s a concern about our competency level and whether we can truly hit the ground running and be successful in those senior roles.” When I asked whether she believed those concerns were rooted in racial or gender biases, she answered, “I think it’s both.” A Latina staffer expressed feeling “tested” and “undermined” and frequently being mistaken for an intern, an indicator of underestimation and biased perceptions that was consistent in my interviews across generations and races of women staffers. To be sure she was taken seriously, Jawando described the consciousness – which she noted was a dual consciousness of both raced and gendered assumptions – with which she made decisions about “what I wore, how I presented myself, [and] even how I wore my hair.” She explained, “It seems so silly, but these are the calculations that you make.”

Adaptation

Drawing upon Benoit's (2007) findings that women lobbyists "adapt to a masculinist structure and culture" of government by "mobilizing masculinity" in the performance of their professional roles to bolster perceptions of their credibility and seriousness (132, 139), I asked former women staffers if they felt any pressure to adapt their behavior or style to fit the male-dominated institution of Congress.¹² Responses to this question were mixed among women, regardless of when they served as congressional staff. While multiple women described feeling pressure to be as assertive (or more assertive) than their male peers in order to be taken seriously, others described how that assertiveness had the potential to be negatively received by others *because* they were women. Former chief of staff Clare Coleman explained, "I felt like I had to work really, really hard and to be assertive, to be heard, to compete against the men in my office," but added that she also confronted expectations that, as a woman, she would or should be "nicer," "that I would always be lovely and cheerful and supportive and, you know, better" as a boss. Another female chief of staff told me, "I forced myself to keep [my temper] on...a short leash," adding, "And that's frustrating, ...when you feel like you are actually changing your personality or walling off some piece of who you are." Multiple women told me that they were particularly cognizant of controlling their emotions in other ways, including *not* crying in front of their bosses or peers – something some felt would have yielded different reactions if they were men.

Importantly, not all women felt these pressures. One woman also distinguished between pressure to fit a "masculine type" and pressure to fit a "Capitol Hill type," questioning whether the behavioral or cultural adaptation by staffers was as closely tied to gender. Moreover, many women expressed pride in their ability to challenge stereotypes and successfully navigate masculine spaces during their tenure in Congress, as well as optimism that the power dynamics on Capitol Hill have

shifted over time to reduce the distinct pressures placed on women. Rochelle Dornatt, whose tenure on Capitol Hill spanned from 1981 to 2017, told the House historian,

As a woman coming from that all-female environment, I always felt empowered to speak my mind, and not to take any guff from anybody. Coming up to the Hill, you learn it's a different environment, and you have to learn how to navigate that environment and try to improve it. In the early years it was a little bit harder, but by the time I left I felt pretty comfortable just speaking out, and the heck with whoever doesn't like it.

The Rewards of Being a Woman on Capitol Hill

One of most common conclusions in each of my interviews with former women staffers was for them to – unprompted – describe the rewards of serving as congressional staff. Across party, position, and race/ethnicity, women described their time on the Hill as “one of the most rewarding experiences of my life,” the “great honor of my life,” the “best career,” the “most rewarding work I've ever done,” and “the time I was the happiest.” They expressed pride in their ability to not only bear witness to history, but to play a role in making history and having an “opportunity to make a real impact on people's lives,” calling it an “incredible privilege.” Dorothye G. Scott, who is among the earliest women staffers included in this analysis, ends her oral history this way: “As I said at my retirement party, I didn't want to leave the Senate. I wanted to take it with me. And I did, in the memories of all the moments that were happy, sad, and nostalgic, but always fulfilling.”

Some of the rewards of service for women changed – or increased – over time, as the institution changed to better accommodate and empower women. But many women I interviewed pointed to their own roles in promoting this gender progress both within and outside of Congress.

Multiple women staffers provided examples of the policies on which they played key and influential roles, including some landmark policies that have been especially beneficial to women. For many of them, they discussed these accomplishments among those they are most proud. Three

women I interviewed were lead staffers during debates over and passage of the *Family and Medical Leave Act*, which passed in 1993. Notably, each of them was pregnant at some point during the legislative deliberations. One Senate staffer told me, “I was exhibit A” for the need of this policy as she sat in meetings over FMLA passage. Another Republican staffer described her success in convincing a conservative senator to support the bill, in part due to his observation of her successful management of a flexible post-birth work plan in his committee office. On two other health-focused debates – the fight for women’s inclusion in National Institutes of Health research in the early 1990s and efforts to maintain preventive care benefits for women in the Affordable Care Act passed in 2010 - multiple women pointed to the role of women staff in holding the line on provisions that would recognize the distinct health realities and needs of women.

Beyond the policies that these women championed for women outside of Congress, they also pointed to their sense of reward or accomplishment in pushing for policy changes that would benefit women inside congressional walls. Many women talked about the distinct challenges that women staff have confronted – and continue to face – while trying to balance the demands of a staff role with those of parenting or caregiving. But, especially as high-level staff and managers in their offices, multiple women I interviewed created and put in place maternity, parental, or family leave policies within their own offices. Michele Jawando crafted a generous policy for Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and described her disappointment to learn that so many other Senate offices had not even thought about the need for one. She explained, “This is a blind spot, [but] at some point...you have to say it's intentional. They are making the choice where they are not recognizing that you're a woman of a certain age and you have a family there are going to be different challenges that you have.” Without the distinct perspectives of women, policies like these may not have been changed. In other cases, policies may have been imposed that were detrimental to women. According to one woman staffer, after Senator Bob Packwood’s abuse of women staff and interns was revealed in the

early 1990s, some congressmen discussed imposing a policy that forbade any male member of Congress being alone with a female staff member.¹³ While the intention was to protect both the woman and the member, the woman staffer told her boss, “You’ve just sentenced every female who works in this office or any office on the Hill or government to a life of being a secretary, or being at the front desk...and that is not what you’re about. You are about empowering women and this absolutely defangs us.” The policy did not move forward.

Women staffers discussed other ways in which they promoted women’s hiring and advancement. Though some women said they paid little special attention to gender or race in hiring, others emphasized they prioritized inclusion of all types. Melody Barnes, who served as chief counsel on the Senate Judiciary Committee, talked about how her committee staff became more representative of the constituents it was meant to serve. “I made it a mission of mine to create that kind of diversity along with the level of excellence and I was quite proud of that and what we were able to achieve,” she told me. She added, “People would tell me, ‘You just didn’t have diversity. You had boutique level diversity.’”

Women chiefs of staff in both the House and Senate have also created affinity groups to support and promote each other. One former member of the women chiefs group in the Senate, Laurie Rubiner, described a mission of that group: “We make sure [a new woman chief has] everything she needs and we kind of prop her up and ...we want to make sure that she is successful.” Other organizations have been created for mothers on Capitol Hill or for women of color. Former chief of staff Joyce Brayboy started a network of African American Women on the Hill, which provides a space for black women to share and confide in issues that might be distinct to their experiences as black women staff in Congress. Michelle Jawando discussed the need for these groups historically and until present day on Capitol Hill: “You know, we have to create these systems and these

networks because [Congress] is, for many people, still a hostile environment and they have to figure out how you navigate that.”

Finally, many of the women I interviewed pointed to their often-unexpected ability to inspire other women to pursue staff leadership roles as a special reward of their congressional service. Clare Coleman said, “I think seeing women operating at a high level of competence in any job makes a difference and causes a reckoning.” Judy Lemons, who ended over two decades of work in Congress as Nancy Pelosi’s (D-CA) chief of staff, explained,

It goes back to what Nancy [Pelosi] always said: “You can’t be what you can’t see.” So we need to increase our numbers, we need to be out there, we need to do good work, and we need to promote other women. Barbara Boxer used to have me come over every quarter and just have a conversation with her interns and...that was the most fun. I love that. ... I always say, “Here is my email. If you think I can help you, you get in touch with me.”

Norma Jane Sabiston, who served as Senator Mary Landrieu’s (D-LA) chief of staff from 1996 until 2007, told me, “I think...the few of us that were there [as women chiefs]...helped open doors for young women who were on Capitol Hill. ...I think that they saw that there was a way for them to...or they wanted to find that path to be the chief of staff.”

Finding that path was different for women who also wanted to be mothers, according to some of the women I interviewed. Betsy Hawkings described how she has come to see herself as a role model (she said that while she was on the Hill “I didn’t appreciate I was a role model to a lot of women”), noting of younger women staffers, “They saw that [if] I could be a good mom and be a chief then maybe they could too.” Another House staffer described this as *the* thing she is most proud of from her time on Capitol Hill:

Although I'm certainly proud of being a part of Obamacare ... [I'm proud that] when I left, I had numerous women come to me and say that I was a role model for them. That I had kids and was in and remained in for some time in a senior level position and that I gave them the belief that they could pursue a career and not just have it be sort of at the lower or middle level, but take it as far as they want to take it and still have a family. So that made me feel really good.

The symbolic influence of their leadership was described by women of color as well, with recognition of the distinct ways in which they could disrupt race and gender expectations of who should or could achieve staff roles. One black woman staffer described calls she from people whose daughters saw her on screen at the State of the Union and thought, "That's something I could do." That power of making women of color visible was described by Denise Desiderio as well. She shared that as a tribal woman, "There's nothing in my upbringing that would have allowed me to actually conceptualize of the career that I have." When school groups come to meet with her, she explains, it allows them to conceptualize their own career paths in ways she could not. She told me, "The relatability of being a woman and an Indian in those positions, I think, was something that I was incredibly proud of...to let them know that it's something that they could do, too." Among many of these high-level women of color staffers, this role was both a privilege and a responsibility. As one Latina chief of staff said about her willingness to always meet with groups of young women, "I'd always make sure to go because they never had a person of color. ...I would never turn that one down. I'd always make sure [to go] because if it would actually help grow the bench, how could I help?" That work did not go unnoticed, including by women who had blazed trails before them. In her oral history, Melody Barnes shared a story about an exchange she had with Coretta Scott King at an awards dinner for the Human Rights Campaign where King and Barnes' boss – Senator Ted Kennedy – were being honored. Barnes recounts,

She pulled me aside just before they went out to receive their awards and speak. I think this was her reflecting her respect for him, but also her sense of history and what she had fought for. She told me how proud she was to see me in the position I was in, working for him, and that was really meaningful to me. *[voice cracks]*

Barnes described that as “a moment I won’t forget,” just as her leadership as a black woman staffer will have lasting effects on the women who follow in her footsteps.

CONCLUSION

The presence of women on Capitol Hill has been more significant and persistent than data on women’s congressional officeholding would indicate. Among congressional staff, women have played key roles from the earliest days of the twentieth century, and their roles and power have changed over time. The archival and interview evidence presented here illuminate the persistence of gender and race dynamics in Congress that create distinct experiences for women, and women of color specifically. From confronting overt discrimination and implicit bias to navigating loneliness and/or marginalization in an institution where women remain underrepresented at the highest levels of power, the women staff in this study reveal the ways in which their gender and racial identities have at times posed challenges to their equality on Capitol Hill. But studying congressional staff over time reveals how norms of gender and race have shifted in ways that challenge the dominance of whiteness and masculinity in Congress. My findings capture these shifts from the perspective of women staff who observed, contributed to, and/or benefitted from these types of institutional change. As committee staffer Stephanie Monroe explained, “There is still of course that good ol’ boys club, but the club doesn’t have a lot of time to meet together.” The distinctive experiences of women staff were not all negative, however. All of the women I interviewed described rewards of their service in Congress, including recognition of the value that they brought to policy deliberation, office culture, or promoting greater inclusion *as women* and *as women of color*.

The policy and institutional impact of diversity will be the subject of my future analyses of former and current congressional staff, which will further demonstrate the value of including congressional staff in any evaluation of gender and race representation on Capitol Hill. By excluding these key actors, existing evaluations of congressional function, outcomes, and change are incomplete. In contrast, centering staff in congressional research will enrich our understanding of Congress as a gendered and raced institution and provide indicators of, and directions for, institutional progress and change.

NOTES

¹ In 1922, Rebecca Latimer Felton (D-GA) became the first woman appointed to the U.S. Senate, but served for only one day. In 1931, after Wells had left the Senate, Hattie Wyatt Caraway (D-AR) was appointed to the U.S. Senate to fill the vacancy left by her deceased husband. She went on to win re-election in 1932.

² This number is based on 2015 numbers, the latest reported in the Brookings Institute's report on *Vital Statistics on Congress*.

³ See Campbell and Childs (2014) for a discussion about the challenges facing mothers in office and creating care-friendly institutional arrangements in the British parliament.

⁴ The bulk of these oral histories are not focused on gender or racial dynamics on Capitol Hill, there is rich data included that illuminates staff experiences and institutional progress (or lack thereof) in women's roles, treatment, and advancement in Congress.

⁵ Data on women chiefs of staff in the U.S. Senate come from the Senate Historian's Office. Before 1985, most of these women (and their male counterparts) were called "Administrative Assistants."

⁶ Prior to the 1980s, congressional chiefs of staff were given the title of administrative assistant.

⁷ What does CMF count as top leadership positions?

⁸ Staff respondents were able to choose more than one racial/ethnic category.

⁹ See "House of Representatives Launches Diversity Initiative" (*SHRM Blog*): <https://blog.shrm.org/workplace/house-of-representatives-launches-diversity-initiative>; "Black Caucus Studies Racial Makeup of House Committee Staffs" (*New York Times*): <https://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/07/09/black-caucus-studies-racial-makeup-of-house-committee-staffs/>

¹⁰ This fact is provided in the introduction to the U.S. Senate Historians' Office oral history with Christine McCreary (May 19, 1998). Available: https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/oral_history/Christine_McCreary.htm

¹¹ In interviews with white women staffers, I did not ask about challenges associated with their race.

¹² Banwart and McKinney (2005) describe this type of "gender adaptiveness" strategy as one that women candidates employ to compensate for gender-specific challenges without challenging their stereotypical and institutional foundations.

¹³ In the early 1990s, Senator Bob Packwood (R-OR) faced multiple allegations of sexual harassment and misconduct. The Senate Ethics Committee concluded, "Senator Packwood engaged in a pattern of abuse of his position of power and authority as a United States Senator by repeatedly committing sexual misconduct, making at least 18 separate unwanted and unwelcome sexual advances between 1969 and 1990." A day before the full Senate was scheduled to vote on his expulsion in 1995, Packwood resigned (Keith 2017).

References

- Banwart, Mary Christine, and Mitchell S. McKinney. 2005. "A Gendered Influence in Campaign Debates? Analysis of Mixed-Gender United States Senate and Gubernatorial Debates." *Communication Studies* 56(4): 353–373.
- Bell, Linda Cohen, and Cindy Simon Rosenthal. 2003. "From Passive to Active Representation: The Case of Women Congressional Staff." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 13(1): 65-82.
- Benoit, Denise. 2007. *The Best-Kept Secret: Women Corporate Lobbyists, Policy, and Power in the United States*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Brookings Institution. 2017. *Vital Statistics on Congress*. Available: <https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/vital-statistics-on-congress/>.
- Brown, Nadia. 2014. *Sisters in the Statehouse: Black Women and Legislative Decision-Making*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Burgat, Casey. 2017. "Among House staff, women are well represented. Just not in the senior positions." *Washington Post*, June 20.
- Campbell, Rosie, and Sarah Childs. 2014. "Parents in Parliament: Where's Mum?" *Political Quarterly* 85(4): 487-492.
- Capitol Hill Women's Political Caucus. 1975. "Sexists in the Senate? A study of differences in salary by sex among employees of the U.S. Senate."
- Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP). N.d. "History of Women in the U.S. Congress." Available: <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/history-women-us-congress>.
- Congressional Management Foundation (CMF). 1993. "1993 U.S. Senate Employment Practices: A Study of Staff Salary, Tenure, Demographics and Benefits." Washington, DC.
- Congressional Management Foundation (CMF). 1994. "1994 U.S. House of Representatives Employment Practices: A Study of Staff Salary, Tenure, Demographics and Benefits." Washington, DC.
- Congressional Management Foundation (CMF). 1995. *Working in Congress: The Staff Perspective*.
- DeGregorio, Christine. 1988. "Professionals in the U. S. Congress: An Analysis of Working Styles." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 13(4): 459–476.
- DeGregorio, Christine. 1994. "Professional Committee Staff as Policymaking Partners in the U. S. Congress." *Congress & the Presidency* 21(1): 49–65.

- Dittmar, Kelly, Kira Sanbonmatsu, and Susan J. Carroll. 2016. "The Challenges of Being a Woman in the 114th Congress." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, PA, September 1.
- Dittmar, Kelly, Kira Sanbonmatsu, and Susan Carroll. 2017. "The Significance of Women in Congress." Paper presented at the European Politics and Gender Conference, Lausanne, Switzerland, June 8-10.
- Dodson, Debra L. 2006. *The Impact of Women in Congress*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Finer, Herbert. 1978. "Administrative Responsibility in Democratic Government." In *Bureaucratic Power in National Politics*, ed. F. E. Rourke. Boston, MA: Little Brown.
- Foerstel, Herbert N., and Karen P. Foerstel. 1996. *Climbing the Hill: Gender Conflict in Congress*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Friedman, Sally, and Robert T. Nakamura. 1991. "The Representation of Women on U.S. Senate Committee Staffs." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 16(3): 407-427.
- Hammond, Susan Webb. 1973. *Personal Staffs of Members of the U.S. House of Representatives*. Ph.D. Diss. The Johns Hopkins University.
- Hammond, Susan Webb. 1996. "Research on Legislative Staffs." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 21(4): 543-576.
- Hawkesworth, Mary. 2003. "Congressional Enactments of Race–Gender: Toward a Theory of Raced–Gendered Institution." *American Political Science Review* 97(4): 529-550.
- Hawkesworth, Mary, Debra Dodson, Katherine E. Kleeman, Kathleen J. Casey, and Krista Jenkins. 2000. "Legislating by and for Women: A Comparison of the 103rd and 104th Congresses." Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University.
- Johannes, John R. 1984. "Women as Congressional Staffers: Does it Make a Difference?" *Women and Politics* 4: 69-81.
- Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. 2017. "Senate Diversity Fact Sheet." Available: <http://jointcenter.org/sites/default/files/Senate%20Staff%20Diversity%20Fact%20Sheet%2012-26-17%20711am.pdf>.
- Jones, James R. 2017. "Black Capitol: Race and Power in the Halls of Congress." Ph.D. Diss. Columbia University.
- Kathlene, Lyn. 1989. "Uncovering the Political Impacts of Gender: An Exploratory Study." *Western Political Quarterly* 42(November): 397-421.
- Kathlene, Lyn. 1994. "Power and Influence of State Legislative Policymaking: The Interaction of Gender and Position in Committee Hearing Debates." *American Political Science Review* 8(8): 560–576.

- Keith, Tamara. 2017. "When Bob Packwood Was Nearly Expelled From The Senate For Sexual Misconduct." *NPR*, November 20.
- Kenney, Sally. 1996. "New Research on Gendered Political Institutions." *Political Research Quarterly* 49(June): 445-466.
- Malbin, Michael. 1980. *Unelected Representatives: Congressional Staff and the Future of Representative Government*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- O'Keefe, Ed. 2017. "Democratic Senate staffers are mostly white and women, new report says." *Washington Post*, June 30.
- Pierce, Rachel. 2014. *Capitol Feminism: Work, Politics, and Gender in Congress, 1960-1980*. Ph.D. Diss. University of Virginia.
- Polsby, Nelson W. 1969. "Policy Analysis and Congress." *Public Policy* 28 (Fall): 70-71.
- Puwar, Nirmal. 2004. *Space Invaders: Race, Gender, and Bodies Out of Place*. New York, NY: Berg.
- Reingold, Beth. 2008. "Women as Officeholders: Linking Descriptive and Substantive Representation." In *Political Women and American Democracy*, eds. Christina Wolbrecht, Karen Beckwith, and Lisa Baldez. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 128-147.
- Romzek, Barbara S. 2000. "Accountability of Congressional Staff." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 10(2): 413-446.
- Romzek, Barbara S., and Jennifer A. Utter. 1996. "Career Dynamics of Congressional Legislative Staff: Preliminary Profile and Research Questions." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 6(3): 415-442.
- Romzek, Barbara S., and Jennifer A. Utter. 1997. "Congressional Legislative Staff: Political Professionals or Clerks?" *American Journal of Political Science* 41(4): 1251-1279.
- Rosenthal, Cindy Simon. 1998. *When Women Lead: Integrative Leadership in State Legislatures*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Sabatier, Paul, and David Whiteman. 1985. "Legislative Decision Making and Substantive Policy Information: Models of Information Flow." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 10(3): 395-421.
- Stamm, Stephanie. 2015. "Among Senior Capitol Hill Staffers, Men Still Outnumber Women." *National Journal*, May 20.
- Swers, Michele L. 2002. *The Difference Women Make: The Policy Impact of Women in Congress*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tabakman, R. B. 2009. "What is Women's Work? The Status of Female Legislative Staff in the United States Congress." Ph.D. Diss. The George Washington University.

Thomas, Sue. 1994. *How Women Legislate*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Whiteman, David. 1995. *Communication in Congress: Members, Staff, and the Search for Information*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.

Wilson, Clark, and Roberto Felix Carlos. 2014. "Do Women Representatives Re-gender Legislative Bureaucracy? Assessing the Effect of Representative Sex on Women's Presence among US Congressional Staff." *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 20(2): 216-235.

Zak, Michael. 2016. "Leona Wells, the first-ever female congressional staffer." *The Hill*, August 2.