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Elections Aren't Enough

New research reveals that women must hold committee leadership positions in legislative bodies to advance gender equality in politics.

- Both the number of women elected and the number of women who serve on legislative committees are critical to advancing issues of gender equality.
- The U.S. legislature lacks the type “social issue” committees in which other countries such as Germany and Sweden, have developed women as legislative leaders.
- As a result, too few women legislators in the U.S. have had the chance to advance distinct issue platforms and develop as leaders within committees.

In 2012, a record number of women were elected to the Senate and House of Representatives, bringing the total to 99 women legislators - 20 in the Senate and 79 in the House. **Two years later, new research shows that getting more women elected is just the first step.** In order to seriously advance gender equality in political institutions and the policies they create, elected women must serve in a variety of committees and in committee leadership roles.

In a comparative study spanning 40 years of legislative terms in the U.S., Germany, and Sweden, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of California - Irvine Catherine Bolzendahl demonstrates the importance of increasing the number of women legislators as well as increasing the number of women in committee leadership roles within the legislature.

“Given the same issue, women and men may look at it in different ways,” Bolzendahl says. “The advantage to electing women is that we [get] a diversity of perspectives regardless of issue area.” Yet, in her study, recently published by *Gender & Society*, Bolzendahl found that, unlike in other countries where women gain traction in social issue committees, there is no such pipeline in the U.S.

These findings are vital in the context of the upcoming mid-term elections, in which 15 women are running for seats in the Senate and an additional 162 women are running for seats in the House.

In Germany, women's legislative participation has been increasing (up to over 32 percent of the legislature in 2009), but often women are tracked and segregated onto committees with a "softer" focus rather than more powerful and prestigious committees. Sweden integrates women into all committees, including committee leadership roles, and is the most gender equitable of the countries Bolzendahl studied, with women's representation approaching 50%. Women in Sweden increasingly sit on all committees and serve as chair or vice chair 40-50% of the time.

In the U.S., however, women have relatively low levels of participation (currently around 19%), women rarely serve as chairs of any committees, much less powerful and prestigious ones. This means that in the U.S. women have less power in terms of agenda-setting and voicing their opinions - both in comparison to their male colleagues and in comparison to women legislators in other industrialized countries.

Further information

[Gender & Society](#) is a peer-reviewed journal, focused on the study of gender. It is the official journal of Sociologists for Women in Society, and was founded in 1987 as an outlet for feminist social science. Currently, it is a top-ranked journal in both sociology and gender studies. Gender & Society, a journal of Sage Publications, publishes less than seven percent of all papers submitted to it. For additional commentary, you can also read the [Gender & Society blog](#) and follow the journal on Twitter: [@Gend Soc](#). For more information, contact Gender & Society editor Joya Misra, Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts. Her research and teaching focus is primarily on gender inequality. She can be reached at misra@soc.umass.edu.

[Sociologists for Women in Society \(SWS\)](#), currently headquartered at the University of Kansas, works to improve women's lives through advancing and supporting feminist sociological research, activism and scholars. Founded in 1969, SWS is a nonprofit, scientific and educational organization with more than 1,000 members in the United States and overseas. For more information, contact Dr. Joey Sprague, Professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas and SWS Executive Officer, at jsprague@ku.edu. Follow us on Twitter and Facebook: [@socwomen](#) and [facebook.com/SocWomen](https://www.facebook.com/SocWomen).