County Governing Boards: Where Are All the Women?

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Abstract:

This research seeks to explore the extent of female representation on county governing boards and then test several hypotheses to explain variation in representation. There are 3,138 counties and county-equivalents in the United States. This study evaluates a random sample of 400 US counties where 19% of the represented counties having populations of 100,000 or more residents, matching the same ratio of counties with populations of 100,000 or more residents nationally.

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Representation is the sin qua non of American democracy. However, the extent to which American legislative institutions adhere to this goal has been a source of debate and even litigation. One problem in evaluating the degree to which reality matches theory is how one should define representation. At a minimum, some maintain, representation ought to be at least descriptive (Pitkin 1967; Meier, et al. 2005). Mansbridge's article in 1999 entitled "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women?..." captures the essence of descriptive representation. While some nations have created quotas for designated groups (Schwindt-Bayer & Squire 2014), in the United States descriptive representation translates into the belief that a representative body should reflect, in general terms, the demographics of the body politic.

Concerns regarding descriptive representation are a central feature of gender politics research in the United States. Fox (2011) explains:

> Women remain drastically underrepresented in US politics, with almost 90 nations ranking ahead of the United States in terms of the number of women in the national legislature. The 2010 mid-term elections represent the first election since the late 1970s in which the total number of women representatives in the US Congress actually declined. (94)

Osborn (2014) maintains that electing women to office strengthens democratic legitimacy and increases the opportunity for diverse interests to be considered in the legislative process (146). Moreover, there is evidence that electing women to office leads to substantive differences in public policy with previous research finding women elected to federal and state offices were more likely than men "to focus on women's issues such as gender equity, day care, flex time, abortion, minimum wage increases" and other social programs (Thomas, 1991; Fox 2011, 95).

While the existing research on women as representatives has been primarily at the national and state level, research on women running and winning elections at the municipal level does exist. However, Fox (2011) in his essay on gender politics offers a number of suggestions of areas of research that need to be addressed including the analysis of women and politics at the local level. For many scholars local politics is defined as municipal politics and this is unfortunate since there are other important local governments including counties; these "forgotten" governments play a major role in our intergovernmental system (Benton 2005). Not only are counties an extension of the state, but they also provide a long list of services to the citizenry. This research seeks to explore these understudied local governments and to examine the status of women as county elected officials. Specifically, the research seeks to examine the extent to which women hold positions on county governing boards.

Literature Review

The literature on representation and gender at the sub-national level generally focuses on state legislatures (Darcy, Hadley, & Kirksey 1993; Werner 1998; Whistler & Ellickson 1999; Swears 2001; Shea & Harris 2006; Fraga, et al 2006; Elder 2012) with additional research focusing on municipalities (Bullock & MacManus 1991; Brown, Heighberger, & Shocket 1993; Alozie & Manganaro 1993; Adams & Schreiber 2011; Smith, Reingold, & Owens 2012). MacManus (1996), in one of the few exceptions, looked at gender composition of county governing boards and indicated "that the proportion of women serving on county governing boards is smaller that any type of elective body other than the U.S. Congress" (66). Not withstanding the paucity of work on gender politics at the county government level it is possible that findings from research on state legislatures and municipalities can translate to county governments.

The literature on women as elected officials at the state and municipal levels have uncovered a variety of possible explanatory factors. One set of factors is linked to the contextual nature of where elections take place. There is considerable evidence that the nature of the community is an important explanatory factor where women were more likely to be elected to councils when there were larger populations (Smith, Reingold, and Owens 2012). Whistler and Ellickson (1999) found that women were more likely to be elected in urban districts than in rural ones (94). Additionally, women were more likely to be elected from districts with higher levels of educational attainment and income (Karnig & Walter 1976).

Place and space may also be linked to the ideological and cultural factors, which have also been posited to be determinants of women's electoral success. Smith et al. (2012) found cities that elect a larger percentage of women were more liberal communities (321). Hill (1981) found political culture to play an important role in the states with those states possessing a moralistic culture to have more women representatives. Miller (2000) almost twenty years later contended that the prevalent traditionalistic culture in the South and "old boy" network discourages women from running for office. Moore (2006) found conservative religious views had differing effects on white and minority women's ambition to seek public office. Moreover, if partisanship can serve as another indicator of ideology and culture there is evidence a partisan gap between Democratic and Republican elected women exists and has found that Democratic women are gaining in the share of percentage of representation while Republican women are declining (Fox 2011; Elder 2012).

Early research on women as elected officials focused on a third broad area of explanatory factors by looking at the structural arrangements of elected offices (Bullock & MacManus, 1991). Darcy, Hadley, and Kirksey (1993) found that under-representation of blacks and women

are one and the same. Specifically they found that "women are more likely to be elected in multi-member districts than in single-member district systems. Interestingly, Black women were more likely to come from multi-member district systems whether in overwhelmingly white or black majority constituencies"[1] (73). In addition, at the municipal level partisanship plays a role with women less likely to be elected in partisan elections than non-partisan elections (Squire & Smith 1988; Smith, Reingold, & Owens 2012, 322).

Finally, scholars have found a link between the nature and structure of the elected office. Hill (1981) explains, "women tend to hold legislative seats in states and communities where legislatives are least professional and legislative services least desirable" (159). His research posited two explanations for this: first, greater compensation, tenure opportunities, and prestige in holding office may create stiffer male competition for office. Second, where legislative service is more of a full-time occupation, roles of women—homemakers and mothers—may indicate that women have less opportunity or time to serve (159). Alozie and Manganaro (1993) determined "that council size helps to predict the presence or absence of women on city councils" (396) with women more likely to be elected to a larger council. Alozie and Manganaro (1993) also discuss *descriptive tokenism* as a possible explanation for this result, meaning that if there are more seats available, then the majority may be more willing to share as a symbolic gesture (393).

In sum, we know little about the nature of county elected boards and the presence of descriptive representation for women. This research, first seeks to determine the presence or non-presence of women on county commissions and then offer possible factors that might explain gender differences in county elected officials. [2]

Methodology

This study looks at county government boards of commissioners at one point in time - 2014. There are currently more than 3,000 county governments in the United States.[3] To examine the composition of county government officeholders we created a stratified random sample of 400 counties from 3,138 counties.[4] We divided the counties into two strata: one for all counties over 100,000 in population (19% of the counties) and a second one for all those counties under 100,000. We then drew a random sample in each stratum. Besides the two states (Connecticut and Rhode Island) that do not have county governments, Maine is the only state that does not have at least one county in the sample.

This research is part of a much larger study on county governments. Our original source of collecting data was through county government websites. When we were unable to determine the gender and race of county officials through information presented on the website we contacted county governments by phone to obtain the composition of the elected board. In addition, we use information in our analysis from the American County Survey. [5] Information was also obtained from the National Association of Counties' website for county governments.

For each county we collected the gender composition of the Commissioners. Most states have established a set size for a county board. Some have it set at three while other have it set at five. Still other states, like Tennessee let the size of the Board vary wildly (in Tennessee it ranges from nine all the way up to a high of 40).

The dependent variable in this research is a count variable: the actual number of women elected to county commissions. While previous research (for example: Engstrom & McDonald 1981, MacManus 1987) has used the percentage of seats held by a population to describe

descriptive representation, count data is the more accurate way to evaluate the presence of women on county boards.

We examine the results using eight explanatory factors. First, there is an expectation that urban counties are more likely to elect women commissioners than rural counties. Urban can be defined in several ways; the Federal government has multiple definitions as a function of the agency one accesses the information from (H.U.D., Agriculture, or the Census Bureau). We have decided to use a dummy variable that distinguishes large counties from small counties - - counties over 100,000 were considered large while all other counties were coded 0 for small. Second, another characteristic hypothesized to be relevant is the level of general population's education. Research has found women to be elected from districts with higher levels of education. Thus, the more educated the populace the more likely women are to be elected to commissions (the percentage of the county residents with an Associates Degree or higher is the measure used for educational attainment). Third, political culture is believed to be important. This research uses an adaptation of Elazar's political culture developed by Sharkansky and reported in Koven and Mausolff (2002), which gives states scores that range from 1 to 9. (Admittedly the classification is a state level classification applied to counties - - we are capturing the culture of the state in which the county is a unit).

Women have been shown to be less likely to serve in professional legislatures. The belief is that professional legislative bodies may require time commitments that conflict with other responsibilities. Moreover, professional legislatures may provide enough incentives to encourage more competition for seats and reduce the likelihood of women being elected. There is no measure of professionalism for county commissioners. As a surrogate for professionalism we have employed a measure that captures the size of the county government (FTE employees in

Administration). The size of the administrative staff should be a function of the size of county

government activities. In other words, the larger the government, the larger the administrative

staff which should then translate into more work for the county commissioners. The job of

county commissioner should be more demanding. The expectation is that the greater the FTE the

less likely for women to be elected to a county commissioner position.

As noted above, the dependent variable is a count measure and the explanatory variables

are a mix of continuous, ordinal and categorical variables (including some transformed into

dummy variables). While OLS could be used to aid in understanding variation in the number of

women commissioners in a county, dependent variables of a count form often have skewed

distributions - - with a large number of zero counts. A better analytical approach would be to use

a Poisson or negative binominal model (including a zero inflated variation of the two). Stata

provides a tool, *Countfit*, to aid in determining the appropriate model to use in analyzing the

dependent variable (Stata FAQ n.d.). The initial analysis with *Countfit* of the number of women

commissioners provided evidence that Poisson regression analysis was the best procedure to

employ: it had the lowest mean difference between observed and predicted, graphically had the

best fitting residual plot of the four procedures, and generally, though not absolute, best test

measures when compared to the other techniques.

Findings

First, the range of commissioner seats available for women ranges from one to forty with

the median number at seven seats. As can be seen in Figure 1., slightly more than 50% (201 of

398) of the counties had *no* female county commissioner. Twenty-nine percent of the counties

had one woman with another 13% having two women commissioners and approximately 7% of

the counties having more than two women commissioners. Second, while not shown, only 15%

of all commissioners in our sample were female with white females making up the largest

subgroup at 13% of the whole. The 15% of county commissioners as women demonstrates a

significant underrepresentation of women on county governing boards.

Figure 1. Number of Women Elected to County Commissions
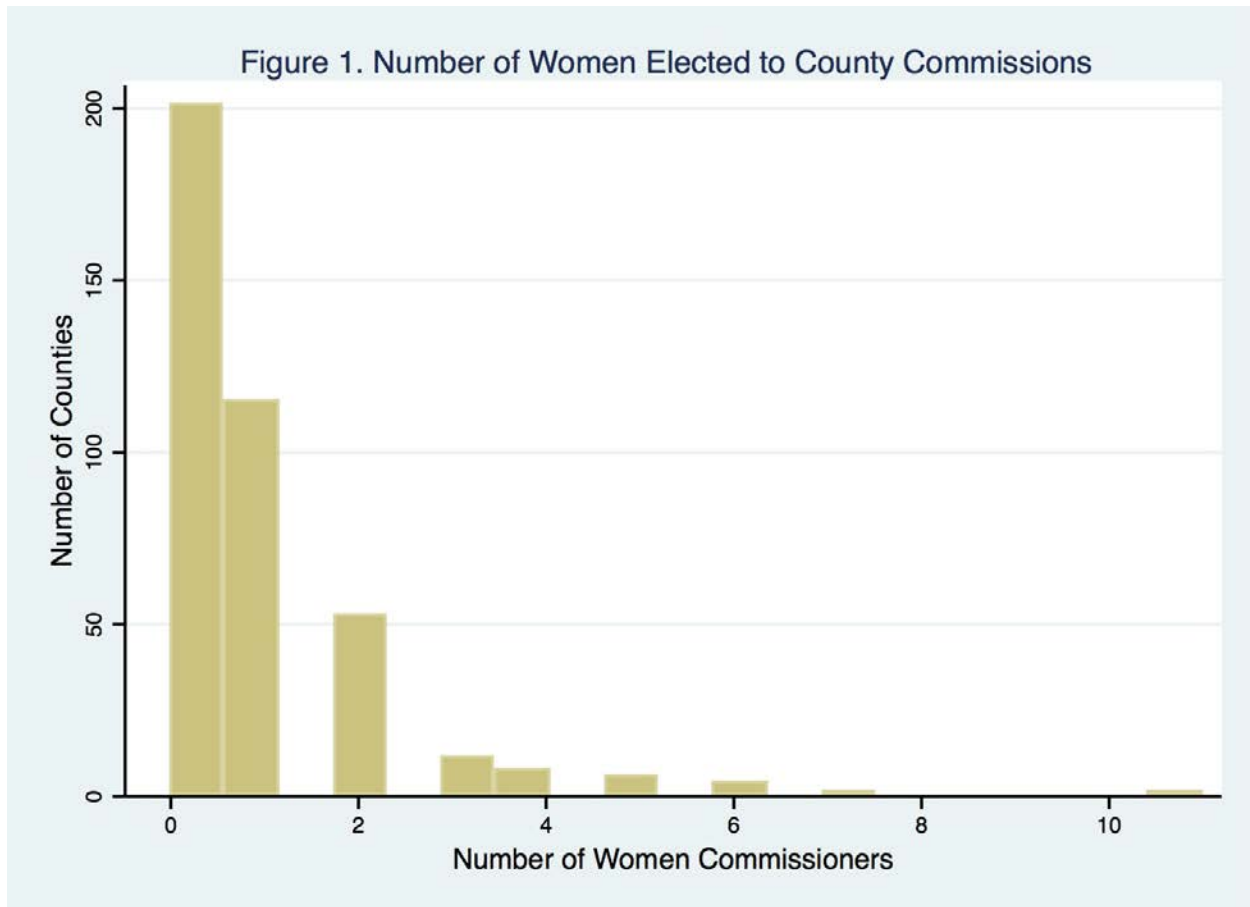
As mentioned previously, eight characteristics (one of the eight has four dummy

variables) are used as explanatory variables (see Appendix A). These variables are broken into

three groups: County Characteristics, Election Formats, and County Government Characteristics.

Variables under County Characteristics were: Higher Educational Attainment, which had a

median score of 26% of populations with an Associates Degree or higher; Elazar's Political

Culture, which had a median score of seven with a range of one to nine and nine indicating least

liberal; Large Counties, which matched our two strata on large and small counties. Nineteen percent of our sample were counties with populations of 100,000 or more. Vote for Obama 2012, which indicates a county's liberal tendency based on the percent of countywide votes for President Obama in the 2012 election, had a median of 38%. Under Election Formats: single-member districts (one officeholder per district elected by the district's constituency) represented 45%, single-member districts with voting at large (one officeholder per district elected by countywide vote) were 12%, multi-member districts (two or more officeholders per district elected by the district's constituency) were 11%, at-large districts (countywide officeholders elected by countywide vote) were 19%, and Combination (a mix of any of the above election formats) was the reference group with 13%. Lastly, County Government Characteristics includes: Size of County Governing Boards ranging from one to 40 seats with a median of five and FTE, which is full time equivalent of administrative staff with a median of 15.

Table 1 presents the results of our Poisson regression analysis with two models. Estimations for our fully specified model of the women representation count are presented in column two of Table 1. At the bottom of column two, and three, is the overall results of the model and model fit. The Wald test shows for the fully specified model, and the restricted model, is statistically significant. As can be seen in column two, six of the variable are not statistically significant, including, for example two of our county characteristics: political culture and the population of the county. Three of the five election format variables were also not statistically significant: partisan election, single-member district-vote at large, and at large district. Lastly, size of the county administration was not significant.

The restricted model in column three includes the remaining five statically significant explanatory variables from the fully specified model. The fourth column presents the Incidence

Rate Ratio (IRR) results for those five explanatory variables. From the IRR we can determine a percentage change in our dependent variable based on a one-unit increase or decrease from one (Piza 2012). For example, in Table 1., the IRR for Higher Educational Attainment of 1.021 represents a 2.1% increase in women representation per one-unit increase in the percentage of county population with an Associates Degree or higher. Another characteristic of the county, Vote for Obama 2012 is significant and the IRR indicates that one unit change in Vote for Obama 2012 is associated with a 1.6% increase in the rate of women representation. As expected, the number of seats on a county commission is associated with women representation. A one-unit change in the number of seats increases the percent change in women representation by 8%. The remaining two significant variables are associated with election formats; single-member districts are 40% more likely to have women commissioners compared to the reference group of districts that have combined modes of selecting commissioners. An even larger percentage, 81% for multi-member districts, would have women representation as compared to our reference group. In sum, the Poisson regression analysis aids in understanding why so few counties have women commissioners.

Discussion

This research sought to determine the extent of descriptive representation on county governing boards with regard to a major subset of the citizenry: women. To put it bluntly women are not present on a significant number of governing boards (50%) and are only marginally represented on many of the other governing boards in U.S. counties. County governments are a local government that should provide for avenues of women representation on governing boards, but it appears that county boards are still the province of an "old boy" network. This is significant since county governments provide a host of services that impact the citizenry.

Our analysis provides support for some of hypothesized relationships including the role of education and liberal ideology (as measured by support for President Obama's reelection). Consistent with research on municipal governments increase educational attainment by the citizenry as well as a more liberal populace predicts increase support for women as county commissioners. In addition, research demonstrated that the more opportunities for women to hold commissioner seats, larger county boards, increased the likelihood of women to hold office. Unfortunately, many states have established a small fixed number of positions on county governing boards; for example, Ohio establishes county boards at three seats. Interestingly enough, women faired better in single-member districts and in multi-member districts compared to other representational mechanisms for selecting commissioners. The latter is consistent with previous research. What is not fully understood is why multi-member districts serve to increase women representation. Do women in multi-member districts get elected as a result of *descriptive tokenism* or is there some other explanation including vote distribution (Alozie & Manganaro 1993). Regrettably, the initial analysis that we thought would provide insight into the significant number of counties with no women commissioners did not come to fruition. In fact, analysis not reported in this research attempted to use a series of factors that have been shown to explain variations in county government activities but failed to assist in delineating variations in women serving on county governing boards (Bernick et al 2014). It is incumbent that research seeks to understand the lack of even descriptive representation in governing counties. If demographic characteristics cannot fully explain the lack of women representation it is even more important that we understand the culture of county government that restricts women as elected officials.

Table 1: Poisson Model of Women on County Governing Boards (Dependent Variable: Count of Women Commissioners)

	Full Model	Final Model	IRR
County Characteristics			
Higher Educational Attainment	0.015**	.021**	1.021
	(.006)[a]	(.005)	(.005)
Elazar's Poltical Culture	0.005		
	(.005)		
Large Counties	0.126		
	(.168)		
Vote for Obama in 2012	.015**	.016**	1.016
	(.005)	(.005)	(.005)
Election Formats			
Partisan Election	0.3		
	(.161)		
Single-member District (SMD)[b]	.596**	.337**	1.4
	(.253)	(.123)	(.173)
SMD, Vote at Large	0.087		
	(.317)		
Multi-member District	.783**	.593***	1.81
	(.256)	(.16)	(.289)
At Large District	0.282		
	(.290)		
County Government Characteristics			
Size of County Governing Boards	.080***	.077***	1.08
	(.008)	(.006)	(.006)
FTE	0.001		
	(.001)		
Model Fit			
Log Likelihood	-411.561	-411.72	
Wald Log Likelihood χ2 (d.f.)	353.85	292.7	
Pseud-R2	0.241	0.241	
N	394	394	

a: Robust Standard Errors are in parenthesis
b: Reference group are counties with a combination of election forms for commissioners
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

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Appendix A: Characteristics of Explanatory Variables

	N	%	Median
Explanatory Variables			
Counties with Partisan Elections	400	83	
Large Counties (≥100,000 population)	400	19	
District Types	400		
Single Member District (SMD)		45	
SMD, Vote at Large		12	
Multi-member District		11	
At Large District		19	
Combination (Reference group)		13	
Countywide Vote for Obama 2012 (%)	396		38
% of County Population w/ AS degree or higher	400		26
Elazar's Poltical Culture (1-9)	400		7
Size of County Governing Boards (Seats range 1-40)	400		5
FTE (Administrative Staff)	400		15

Endnotes

1. This is contrary to the general picture for minorities where districts serve to heighten electoral success (Meier et al 2005).
2. In the research we use the term commissioner to represent the individual office holder elected to the representative policy making unit in a county. The name of that body and the office holder's title varies across the 48 states. For example, in Wisconsin they are referred to as Supervisor while in Arkansas they are titled as "Justice of the Peace."
3. The exact number of counties should be easily determined; however, it is not since some units of government could be interpreted as a municipality, a county or both. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau in its *Governance Organization Summary Report* determined that the consolidated Nashville-Davidson County will be counted as a municipality. However, in reporting data from the American Community Survey (ACS) the Bureau presents the data for Davidson County. As a point of reference, we have counted the locality as a county based on Census from ACS and NACo.
4. In Alaska and Louisiana the equivalent unit to county government are called boroughs and parishes respectively. It should also be noted that in a few states some areas of the state are not within county government jurisdictions.
5. Our analysis used the Five-Year Estimates rather than One-year Estimates. While the One-Year Estimate has the advantage of currency, the Five-Year Estimate has three distinct advantages. First, over the five-year period all of the counties will have information available including even the smallest county. Second, the extended time period has a "smoothing" out affect. Finally, the information is more reliable.