

Still Supermadres? Gender and the Policy Priorities of Latin American Legislators

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This article examines the effect of gender on legislators' attitudes and bill initiation behavior in three Latin American countries—Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica. I argue that sex role changes in Latin America over the past 35 years have led to changes in how female legislators perceive their political roles, and consequently, changes in their attitudes and behavior. Specifically, female legislators will place higher priority than male legislators on women's issues and children/family concerns, but their attitudes in other areas, such as education, health, the economy, agriculture, and employment, will be similar. However, I expect that gender dynamics in the legislative arena lead to marginalization of women such that gender differences will emerge for bill initiation behavior where they did not appear for attitudes. I test this using a survey of legislators' issue preferences and archival data on the bills that legislators sponsor and find statistical support for the hypotheses.

In her seminal book on women in Latin American politics, Elsa Chaney (1979) described female politicians as “supermadres”—“tending to the needs of her big family in the larger casa of the municipality or even the nation” (21). Based on interviews with female candidates and officeholders in Chile and Peru, she found that women viewed political office as an extension of their roles as mothers and wives and felt a responsibility to focus on issues derived from those roles—protecting children and the family, education, and healthcare, for example. In the 25 years since Chaney's writing, women's status has changed significantly in Latin America (Craske 1999). Women have increased their presence in the public sphere, the paid labor force, and universities, among many other changes. As of yet, however, little empirical research exists on the attitudes and behavior of female politicians today, how they differ from male politicians, and how they have changed since Chaney's characterization, if at all. Are female legislators still “supermadres,” focusing primarily on “nurturant and affectational tasks” related to their traditional roles (Chaney 1979, 20)? Or, have the social, economic, and political transformations of recent years changed how women legislate?

While similar questions have been asked recently in the United States and, to a lesser degree, in Western Europe

(see, for example, O'Regan 2000; Swers 2001; Thomas 1994), less attention has focused on Latin America (see for exceptions, Jones 1997; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003). In this article, I examine gender differences in legislators' attitudes and bill initiation behavior across three Latin American countries—Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica. I focus on both the preferences that legislators bring to the legislative arena and their bill initiation behavior as measures of legislators' priorities and argue that gender may have a different effect for attitudes than it does for behavior. Given the sex role changes in Latin America in recent years, female legislators today are likely to view their political roles differently than they did 35 years ago, and women and men now may be similar in many of their issue preferences. However, gender may be more divisive when legislators move beyond simply expressing preferences to acting on them. More specifically, the influx of women into the legislative arena threatens male dominance of that space and may result in segregation or marginalization of women. Male legislators, who still control most of the powerful positions within the legislature, may pressure women, both directly and indirectly, into working on legislation in the thematic areas traditionally considered “women's domain” while men focus on “more important” issues in “men's

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domain.” Consequently, the image of “supermadres” may no longer be accurate, even though gender dynamics in the legislative environment portray them that way.

Attitudes, Behavior, and the Issues

Numerous studies from the United States and Western Europe have examined gender differences in attitudes and behavior focusing on them as measures of legislators’ policy priorities (see, for example, Dodson and Carroll 1991; Reingold 2000). But they often do so without explicitly distinguishing how gender might shape attitudes differently than it does behavior. *Attitudes* of legislators predispose them to focus on certain issues while *behavior* is the way in which attitudes get translated into action. Though sometimes similar, attitudes and behavior often vary. A legislator may feel that education is very important but not sponsor any education bills while in office. This may be due to time constraints, limited legislative capital, or chamber norms. For example, members of the governing party may think that certain issues are important but not sponsor bills on them because the president sponsors most of the legislation in that area. Seniority in the legislative chamber may condition behavior such that senior members work on and sponsor more important bills, restricting junior members to less potent issues. Gender discrimination may occur with men wanting to safeguard their legislative dominance and limit women’s access to legislation on certain issues. In short, a range of constraints in the legislative chamber that may not be relevant when simply stating support for an issue come into play when legislators have to decide which bills to sponsor. Yet, very few studies have attempted to describe how or explain why gender differences might vary across attitudes and behavior (for an exception, see Wangnerud 2000).

I define eight thematic categories on which to compare women’s and men’s attitudes and behavior: women’s issues, children and family issues, education, health, the economy, agriculture, employment, and fiscal affairs.¹ These categories represent some of the areas in which legislators create and debate policy, they replicate categories used in other studies (Dodson and Carroll 1991; Jones 1997; Reingold 2000; Swers 2002; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003), and they represent a broader distinction between issues in “women’s domain” and “men’s domain” (Chaney 1979; Craske 1999; Htun 2003; Molyneux 1985;

¹Employment is a category for the attitudinal analyses only and fiscal affairs is a category for the bill initiation analyses only. The other categories are identical for the attitudes and behavior analyses. In total, there are seven categories for each set of analyses.

Sapiro 1981).² Women’s domain issues include women’s issues, which are “feminist” issues, education and health, which are often considered “feminine” issues, and children and family issues which are both “feminist” and “feminine.”³ Men’s domain includes concerns accorded to a man’s traditional role as head of the household and being in the public sphere, such as the economy, agriculture, employment, and fiscal affairs. This distinction between women’s domain and men’s domain parallels a normative distinction sometimes made between these issues being “less important” versus “more important,” politically.

Most of the eight categories are self-explanatory, but two deserve clarification. Women’s issues are those directly affecting women that are widely supported by feminist groups and women’s organizations including concerns such as reproductive health freedoms, domestic violence protections, gender equality legislation, civil rights for women, sexual harassment policy, and equal pay for equal work. Some women’s issues cross into other thematic categories, but if they target women directly (e.g., sexual harassment or reproductive health), then they are women’s issues. The children and family category includes concerns such as divorce and other family contract matters, children’s welfare, child sex crimes, child work restrictions, and drug prevention for minors.⁴

A number of existing studies examine gender differences in legislators’ issue priorities only on women’s domain thematic areas (Jones 1997; Swers 2002; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003). However, I examine all eight thematic areas defined above because focusing on the wider range of issues permits drawing broader and more accurate conclusions from the study. For example, if I only examined women’s issues, children/family issues, education, and health and found significant gender differences, I might conclude that stereotypical differences between men and women persist in Latin America. But, if I also

²A variety of phrases have been used to discuss this distinction—women’s domain and men’s domain, women’s interests or men’s interests, female issues versus male issues, etc. This classification also has been criticized by scholars who see the dichotomy as reinforcing the subordinate position of women’s issues.

³Again, scholars vary on terminology here. Some distinguish feminist and feminine issues (e.g., Craske 1999), others use strategic gender interests versus practical gender interests (e.g., Molyneux 1985), while still others talk about “feminine” issues in terms of mothering issues or maternal concerns. Children and family issues are more difficult to classify as feminist or feminine because some children and family issues, such as divorce rights, are clearly feminist while children’s welfare programs would be better characterized as feminine since they draw on qualities of caring or nurturing.

⁴Although education could conceivably be a children’s issue, it is broader than most of the other children’s issues and has its own category in this study.

analyzed gender's role in legislators' preferences for economic, fiscal, and agricultural issues, I might find no evidence of gender differences, which would suggest that many traditional stereotypes are no longer appropriate. This would contradict the conclusion drawn from looking at women's domain issues only. Thus, it is important to include the full range of thematic areas to compare women's and men's attitudes and behavior appropriately.

Gender Differences in Legislator Attitudes and Behavior

The "supermadre" label implies that women in politics will promote feminine issues while men focus on issues traditionally in men's domain.⁵ Chaney writes of female politicians in Latin America, "They (and the men) almost invariably appear to consider their intervention as an extension of their family role to the area of public affairs" (1979, 20). She points out that "'male' issues revolve around questions of authority, power, war, arms, monopoly over resources, economic policy" while "'female' issues tend to relate to the family, children, and the old, food prices and inflation, peace, moral questions" (164).⁶ Further, her study finds that not only do women and men differ in the issues they prefer but in the tasks they perform while in office. She notes that even if women hold nonfeminine or "neutral" positions, "posts which either a man or a woman might fill," they "are overwhelmingly engaged in feminine-stereotyped tasks related to education, social welfare, health, and cultural fields" (133). Even though Chaney was describing women in Latin American politics in the late 1960s, she reaffirms her hypotheses for female politicians in the 1990s (Chaney 1998). Thus, if women in today's legislatures are still "supermadres," we would expect to see women sticking to feminine issues while men focus on issues in men's domain.

Significant changes in women's status in Latin America over the past 35 years brings into question the relevance of hypothesizing that female politicians are still "supermadres" (Craske 1999; Htun 2000). Today, women's enrollment in higher education is equal to men's

in many countries, and in some countries more students are female than male. The proportion of the paid labor force that is female increased from one-quarter in the 1950s to one-third in the 1980s and ranged from 29% to 42% across countries in 2002 (World Development Indicators 2004). Women comprise remarkably large proportions of national legislators in several countries, as high as 35% in Costa Rica in the 2002 election, and record numbers of women have been appointed to ministerial positions—in 2003, half of the Colombian cabinet was female (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2005). Changes also are evident at the household level in Latin America. An increase in female-headed households has led women to take on the role of sole economic provider in addition to traditional roles such as caregiver. At the same time, a decline in the average size of families in Latin America has made it easier for women to work outside the home and participate in political activities. Of course, highlighting these improvements in women's status obscures the fact that women and men in Latin America are still far from equal, and it obscures variation across countries. But, the changes that have occurred justify revised hypotheses about male and female legislators' attitudes and behavior.

I argue that a legislator's gender should influence both attitudes and behavior, but its effect may vary across thematic areas and should be less salient for attitudes than behavior. In terms of attitudes, I expect that changing gender roles in Latin America mean women no longer view their political roles solely as an extension of their roles as mothers and wives, and consequently, male and female legislators' issue preferences will be the same in many thematic areas. Specifically, women and men are unlikely to differ in their self-stated preferences for "feminine issues"—education and health—and "men's domain" issues—economics, agriculture, and employment.

However, differences in preferences may emerge for women's equality and, perhaps to a lesser degree, children and family issues. Changing gender roles in Latin America, women's entry into arenas previously dominated by men, and women's experiences in the women's movements that developed during the transitions to democracy in the 1980s, have increased women's awareness of and interest in feminist issues, whether or not they accept the label of those issues as "feminist" (Jaquette and Wolchik 1998; Molyneux 1985). Thus, women are likely to be more concerned with women's issues and children/family issues than men would be.⁷ Yet, the differences may be in degree

⁵Chaney's research did not include men, meaning that references to men's behavior is inferred, not empirically measured.

⁶Chaney's argument does not imply that women focus on feminist issues. Chaney's argument about the "supermadre" is that women are motivated by feminine interests to work primarily on feminine issues. In part, this was because feminism was a relatively new concept to Latin America in the late 1960s and anathema to most women who saw it as something being imposed by women in the developed, western world.

⁷This argument does not imply that women are a homogeneous group with exactly the same interests. There is great diversity in interests women have resulting from differences in class, race,

of preference rather than in absolute terms. Women and men may both view these issues as important, differing only in just how important they are. Even where men make up the overwhelming number of government officials, it would be difficult to find a man who would publicly speak out against women's equality even if he personally did not believe in it. As Craske writes, "Latin American governments were keen to be seen to be prioritizing women's rights as evidence of their new role as 'modern' states" (2003, 37).

Gender differences are likely to emerge in all of the thematic areas when legislators act on their preferences and introduce legislation. In a recent article, Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, and Taylor-Robinson (2005) find that male legislators in Latin America marginalize female legislators by isolating them on women's issues and social committees and keeping them off of power committees and economics/foreign affairs committees. They do so because as the "traditionally dominant group," men feel that dominance threatened and want to protect a "scarce political resource," committees (420). I am not arguing here that bills are a "scarce political resource," but a similar type of marginalization may be occurring in the legislative activity of bill sponsorship. Men may feel threatened by the growing numbers of women in the public sphere and want to keep issue areas segregated. Men maintain their dominance on issues traditionally related to the public sphere and men's work, which often are the most salient political issues (e.g., neoliberal economic reforms). Women then get pressured, either indirectly or directly, to stick to "less important" women's domain issues. If the pressure is indirect, women face a tense legislative environment where men isolate women through committee assignments or exclude women from unofficial meetings on economic policy problems, making women *feel* isolated and *feel* pressured to work primarily on "women's domain" issues. More direct pressure would occur when men openly express opinions that female legislators should work on bills that they have the most experience with—bills dealing with home or family, for example.

Several female legislators that I interviewed in Costa Rica perceived marginalization in the legislative arena. They pointed out that the political space is men's space and adding women to that has simply created two separate spaces. Female legislators in Colombia recognize the patriarchal nature of the Congress and are reluctant to discuss gender issues because it threatens men and brings out

ethnicity, religion, and sexuality. Some women may have a "feminist consciousness" while others do not (Dovi 2002). Yet, theory and research also suggest that, in general, women often are more similar to each other than they are to men. It is that premise that underlies my argument here.

divisiveness (Zambrano 1998). Because of this marginalization, I expect significant gender differences to emerge in bill initiation behavior where they do not exist in attitudes. Women are likely to sponsor more bills on education and health and sponsor less legislation than men in areas of the economy, agriculture, and fiscal affairs. I also expect that female legislators will be more focused on women's issue and children/family bills, but the reason for this attention may be a combination of marginalization and the greater priority that women place on women's issues and children/family issues to begin with.

In sum, I hypothesize that significant gender differences exist in attitudes toward women's issues and children/family issues but not for other thematic areas. However, when legislators move to sponsoring legislation in these other thematic areas, traditional divisions between men and women are likely to reemerge as male legislators place pressure on female legislators to stick to areas in which they have "expertise"—education and health in addition to women's issues and children/family issues—while men maintain their dominance in areas of economics, agriculture, and fiscal affairs.

The Cases: Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica

I selected three countries that represent some of the diversity of Latin America to test hypotheses about how men and women legislate differently. Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica are presidential systems, as are all 19 countries in Latin America, with legislatures that play a considerable role in policymaking. The three countries provide four legislative chambers in which to test for gender differences. Costa Rica's National Assembly is unicameral while Argentina and Colombia have bicameral legislatures; however, I only examine the lower house in Argentina, the Chamber of Deputies, because the Senate was appointed up until 2001.

The choice of Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica is important because they provide variation on legislative and socioeconomic environments, allowing a test of gender's effect across diverse settings. The proportion of women in office ranges from a low of 7% in the Colombian Senate during the 1994–98 term to 31% in the Argentine Chamber of Deputies during the 2001–2003 term. Electoral rules vary from an extremely personalistic system in Colombia to more party-centered systems in Argentina and Costa Rica. The 2000 Gender Development Index, which estimates levels of development weighted by gender inequality, gives Argentina the highest rating of the three countries, 0.836, with Costa Rica in the middle,

0.814, and Colombia at the bottom, 0.767. In contrast, one of the poorest countries in Latin America, Guatemala, rates 0.617, and the United States' index value is 0.937.⁸

Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica also differ in several ways from the United States and Western Europe where the bulk of research on gender and legislative representation exists. They have strong, traditional, Catholic cultures dominated by "machismo." They are new democracies, but all three have had their current democratic regimes for a sufficient period of time for representation norms to be ingrained—Costa Rica since 1949, Colombia since 1974, and Argentina since 1983. They have levels of economic development that are much lower than the United States and Western Europe. In 2000, GDP per capita in constant 1995 U.S. dollars was \$31,730 in the United States compared to \$8,174 in Argentina, \$3,911 in Costa Rica, and \$2,289 in Colombia (World Bank Development Indicators 2004). In sum, Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica provide a good setting for testing gender differences in legislative behavior, and the diversity among the cases helps to make them representative of Latin America, more broadly. By including all three countries in this study, I can test the generalizability of gender's effect across different environments and compare findings for Latin America to the developed democracies of Western Europe and the United States.

Attitudes

In 2001–2002, I conducted a survey of legislators from the 2001–2003 congress in Argentina and the 1998–2002 congresses in Colombia and Costa Rica. For Colombia and Costa Rica, legislators were in their last year of a four-year term, giving them considerable experience as representatives even if this was their first term in office. Argentine deputies were more than halfway finished with the 2001–2003 congressional session. They are elected to four-year terms, but half of the deputies are reelected every two years, creating two-year congresses. In all countries, the survey was either filled out in the presence of the legislator or, if legislators spent very little time in their offices, it was given to the legislator's staff with instructions for the legislator, not assistants, to complete it. In total, I surveyed 292 legislators across the three countries—174 in Colombia, 50 in Costa Rica, and 68 in Argentina.⁹

⁸Human Development Report (2002) <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2002/en/>

⁹Colombia and Costa Rica had very high response rates, 67% and 88%, respectively. Argentina's response rate was lower, 37%, but sufficient for analysis. Due to logistical problems in distributing

To measure legislators' attitudes toward issues in the thematic areas, I use a question from the survey that asks representatives to "Please indicate the priority of the following policy areas to your legislative work," and among the list of policy areas are women's equality, children and family issues, education, health, the economy, agriculture, and employment. They were given five priority choices to rank each: very high, high, moderate, low, and very low. I use ordered probit models to predict the likelihood that a legislator will respond in each one of the five priority categories with the seven thematic areas as separate models. Due to missing data, the analyses in this section have sample sizes between 250 and 258 legislators.

Gender is the primary independent variable, coded "0" if the legislator is a man and "1" if a woman. To isolate gender's effect on attitudes, I control for personal characteristics of legislators that might influence their preferences. The survey asked legislators a series of background questions, and responses to those questions provide the basis for the control variables—age, whether or not the legislator has a college degree, whether the legislator's previous occupation was in business, education, agriculture, or a medical field, whether the legislator represents a rural (coded "0") or urban district (coded "1"), and ideology.¹⁰ Ideology is a 5-point ordinal scale from -1 to 1 (leftist to rightist) based on Coppedge's (1997) classification of political parties in Latin America.¹¹ I also account for the different socioeconomic environments in the three countries with a control variable for level of development

surveys to the entire chamber in Argentina, the survey was only given to members of the two largest parties—the Partido Justicialista (PJ) and the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR). At the time, they comprised 71% of the legislature. The resulting samples were representative of each country's congress with the exception that the PJ in Argentina was overrepresented by 10% compared to the UCR. I adjust for this, the overrepresentation of Costa Rican respondents, and the underrepresentation of Argentine respondents with a weight variable in each of the statistical models below.

¹⁰Urban districts are those where the population density of a district exceeds the national average while rural districts have densities below the average. For example, legislators from Bogotá, Colombia, with a population density of 3,955 inhabitants per square kilometer represent an urban population whereas those from Amazonas, a department in the southeast rainforest with a population density of 0.6 inhabitants per square kilometer represent a rural constituency (average Colombian population density = 36.4 inhabitants/km²).

¹¹Legislators in parties that Coppedge (1997) classifies as "other" or "unknown" receive a "0" coding so as not to bias the results (Johnson and Crisp 2003). The two largest parties in Argentina, the UCR (Unión Cívica Radical), and the PJ (Partido Justicialista) are considered centrist (0) and center-left (-.5), respectively. The dominant parties in Colombia are centrist (Partido Liberal) and center-right (Partido Conservador), and the two large parties in Costa Rica are center-left (Partido Liberación Nacional) and center-right (Partido Unidad Social Cristiana). Small parties proliferate in each of the countries, and they also are classified into these categories.

TABLE 1 Determinants of Attitudes toward Various Thematic Areas

	Women's Equality	Children and Family	Education	Health	Economy	Agriculture	Employment
Gender	1.05** (.22)	.41* (.21)	-.23 (.24)	-.25 (.21)	-.15 (.20)	-.58** (.17)	-.42* (.21)
Ideology	.11 (.22)	.05 (.22)	.53* (.25)	.49* (.24)	.35 (.23)	.22 (.22)	.30 (.27)
Age	-.005 (.009)	-.01 (.01)	-.002 (.01)	.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)
College Degree	-.10 (.21)	-.28 (.25)	-.41 (.27)	-.47 [†] (.25)	.50* (.20)	.17 (.22)	.21 (.24)
Occupation:							
Business Professional	-.04 (.17)	-	-	-	.27 [†] (.16)	.33* (.17)	-.19 (.18)
Educator	-	.23 (.23)	.36 (.27)	-	-	-	-
Health Professional	-	-	-	.67* (.28)	-	-	-
Urban District	.08 (.18)	.24 (.16)	-.01 (.20)	-.01 (.18)	-.07 (.18)	-.57** (.17)	-.08 (.20)
GDP per capita	-.29 [†] (.16)	-.07 (.16)	-.16 (.17)	-.25 (.17)	.20 (.17)	-.38* (.16)	.11 (.19)
Log Likelihood	-305.66	-329.04	-223.79	-274.34	-277.92	-324.19	-200.60
Chi Square	25.88	12.77	10.45	17.57	17.67	43.20	8.55
n	252	250	256	252	254	252	258

Ordered probit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. [†]p < 0.10, *p < .05, **p < .01.

measured as logged GDP per capita in constant 1995 U.S. dollars during 2000.

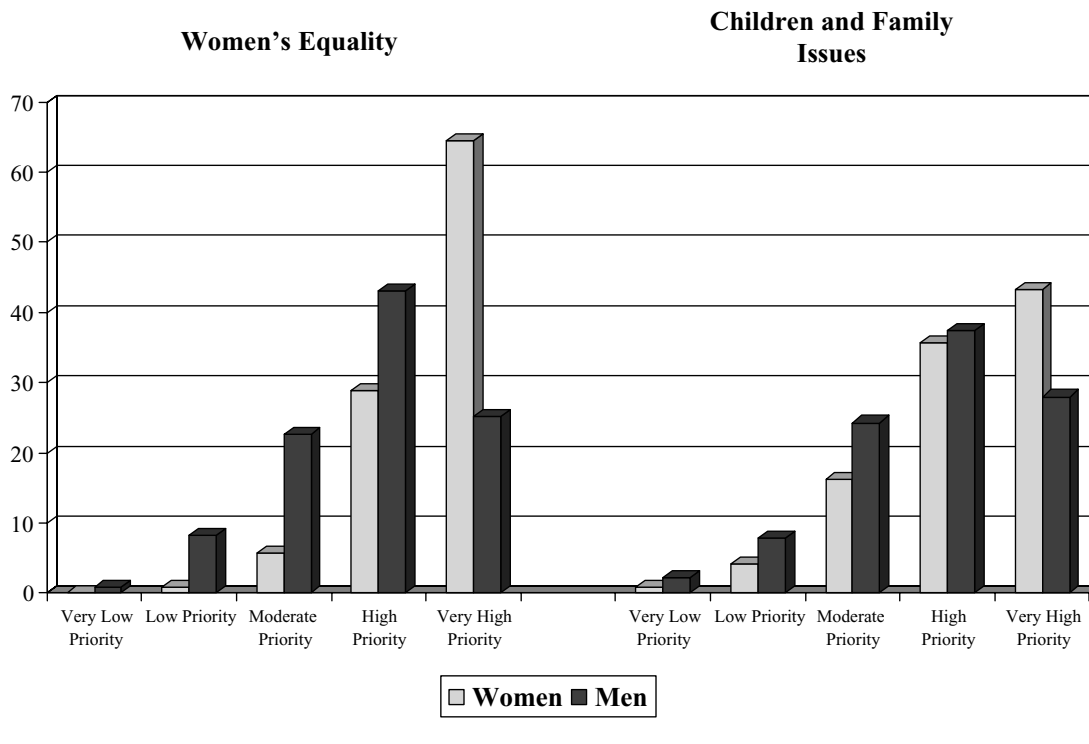
Table 1 presents the results for each thematic area. As expected, female legislators place higher priority on women's equality and children/family issues than male legislators, and gender is not significant for education, health, or the economy. But, unexpectedly, gender does influence attitudes toward agriculture and employment with women placing less importance on those issues than men. Changes in sex roles in Latin America over the past 35 years have eliminated differences in preferences for education, health, and the economy, but not for agriculture or employment issues. This makes sense for agriculture where women's employment in agriculture is very small, as low as 0.2% in Argentina, and has barely changed since 1980 (World Development Indicators 2004). The findings are more puzzling for employment issues since women increasingly are seeking work outside the home but often struggling with informal sector economic activities rather than formal sector work.

The ordered probit coefficients in the models do not offer a very intuitive interpretation for the substantive

effect of gender so Figure 1 shows the predicted probabilities that male and female legislators will respond in each of the five categories of priority for women's equality and children/family issues.¹² From one perspective, the figure shows that the gender disparity is substantively quite large for both thematic areas. Holding other variables at their mean, the first model predicts that 65% of female legislators feel that women's equality is "very important" compared to only 25% of male legislators—a 40% difference. For children and family issues, the disparity is smaller but still statistically significant at 15%. From another perspective, the figure reveals that, overall, both men and women view women's issues and children/family issues to be important. Combining the percentages of respondents in the "high priority" and "very high priority" categories shows that 94% of women are predicted to be highly supportive of women's issues but so are 68% of men. For children

¹²I use the Clarify software created by Tomz, Wittenberg, and King (2001) in conjunction with STATA to compute the predicted probabilities (see also King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000). Following standard practice, I set continuous variables at their mean and dichotomous variables at their mode.

FIGURE 1 Predicted Probabilities of Attitudes toward Women's Equality and Children/Family Issues



and family issues, a predicted 79% of women support them along with 66% of men. Clearly, differences exist between women's support and men's support, but the predictions also show that two-thirds of male legislators view these issues as important. In fact, the models predict that only a small percentage of male legislators place "low" or "very low" priority on these issue areas (9% for women's equality and 10% for children/family issues), and they also predict that women will be in those categories (1% for women's equality and 5% for children/family issues). In sum, while women place higher priority on women's equality and children/family issues than do men, both genders do view them as important political concerns.

Most of the control variables in Table 1 are not strong predictors of legislators' preferences, with a few notable exceptions. First, occupation is significant in several models. Health professionals place higher priority on health than legislators with other occupational backgrounds and business professionals place greater priority on the economy and agriculture, an economic area of major importance to Latin American countries. Somewhat surprisingly, educators do not place significantly higher priority on education, though the sign of the coefficient is in the expected direction. Second, having a college degree leads legislators to place higher priority on the economy but

lower priority on health issues. Third, legislators from rural districts view agriculture as more important than representatives of urban districts. This may indicate that constituency influences shape the attitudes of representatives, but it may also reflect the fact that a rural district is unlikely to elect someone who does not already prioritize agriculture. Finally, legislators in countries with higher levels of development have less preference for women's issues and agriculture. This may reflect the lower importance of agriculture to more developed economies and the higher levels of gender equality found in more developed countries. Most importantly, these control variables elucidate that the effect of gender is generalizable across legislators with different personal characteristics and across socioeconomic environments.

The insignificance of ideology in most models may seem surprising given the importance of party and ideology in the United States and Western Europe. Studies on gender and legislators' preferences in the United States find gender differences in legislators' priorities primarily within parties, not across them. Reingold writes, "As almost every study makes clear, *sex differences pale in comparison to party differences*. Among political elites, party affiliation is a much stronger predictor of policy preferences than is sex" (2000, 158). Here, I do not simply

control for party membership but what it is about party membership that affects the bills legislators sponsor, i.e., ideology. The findings show that gender is important across different ideologies. I also tested an interaction term between gender and ideology to see if gender has different effects *within* ideological tendencies (models not shown). In other words, do gender differences in preferences for women's equality, for example, only exist among leftist legislators since men and women on the right might be less inclined to support women's equality? Apparently not. The interaction between gender and ideology was not statistically significant for any of the seven thematic areas.

This highlights an important difference between the United States and Latin America. Latin American political parties have considerably weaker ideological underpinnings than parties in the United States and Western Europe (Coppedge 1997; Rosas 2005). Despite the ideological strength of Latin American parties traditionally (e.g., the Liberals and Conservatives in Colombia in the 1800s and into the National Front, which ended in 1974), significant shifts in ideology and weakening of the major parties have occurred over the past 30 years and have contributed to a rise in the number of small parties represented in national politics. This is not to say that Latin American parties are entirely nonideological or that the weakness of ideology is constant across all countries (see Rosas 2005), but in comparison to the United States and Western Europe, significant differences do exist. Additionally, ideological differences exist within parties, which admittedly makes party a less-than-perfect measure of ideology in Latin America. A better measure would be something similar to Poole and Rosenthal's NOMINATE scores, but these are not available in most Latin American countries because they do not regularly record roll-call votes.

To be sure that gender differences in one country do not drive the results, I ran the models separately for each of the four chambers (not shown). In the disaggregated models, women still place significantly higher priority on women's equality than do men. Gender differences are weaker for children and family issues in Argentina and Costa Rica and neither agriculture nor employment shows significant gender differences in the Colombian Chamber or Senate. Some of these differences may be a result of the smaller sample sizes in the disaggregated models—they drop as low as 46 in Costa Rica where the chamber only has 57 seats. Also, some variables in the full models cannot be included in the disaggregated models. For example, Colombian senators are elected from a single nationwide district, making their constituency base the entire country. The urban/rural variable measuring district characteristics is not relevant here.

In sum, the results show that female legislators consider women's issues and children/family issues to be of higher importance than do men, in general, while men place higher priority on agriculture and employment. Gender does not contribute to different attitudes toward education, health, or the economy. Do the gender differences that exist for attitudes translate into differences in the bills legislators initiate? Do dynamics of the legislative arena lead women to sponsor education and health bills more often than men even though they do not place higher importance on these concerns?

Bill Initiation

I examined all bills initiated during two congresses in Costa Rica and Colombia, 1994–98 and 1998–2002, and two years in Argentina, 1995 and 1999.¹³ I coded bills as to whether or not they fit into the seven thematic areas described previously. Table 2 shows the number of bills introduced in each country by thematic area. More economic bills were initiated than any others. Women's issue bills are less common, ranging from as few as nine in the 1998–2002 congress of the Colombian Chamber of Representatives to 35 in the same years in Costa Rica.

Rules and motivations for initiating bills in Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica are quite similar across the three countries. Legislators can sponsor bills on any issue in any chamber, with the exception that budget bills must be introduced in the Colombian Chamber of Representatives while international relations bills must start in the Senate. In Colombia and Costa Rica, no limits exist on the number of cosponsors a bill can have, and all signers are considered equal supporters of the bill. In other words, bills do not have a primary sponsor. In Argentina, a maximum of 15 legislators can sign any one bill, and each bill has a primary sponsor with other signers listed as cosponsors. In all three countries, the executive branch has the power to introduce bills (and does so), and in Colombia, the president has the power of exclusive bill introduction in several policy areas, most notably, the national budget, some fiscal affairs issues, and treaties with foreign nations. Executives in Argentina and Colombia are more powerful than the Costa Rican president (Shugart and Carey 1992), but in all three countries, the legislature exerts a check on the executive and is the primary locus of policymaking.

¹³In Argentina, I use bills from one year only because of the disproportionately large number of bills introduced during a two-year congress. This yields a total number of bills more in line with what legislators in Costa Rica and Colombia initiate in a four-year term (see Table 2) and ensures a balanced data set such that no one country skews the results.

TABLE 2 Number of Bills Sponsored in Each Thematic Area

	Argentina		Colombia—Chamber		Colombia—Senate		Costa Rica		Total
	1995	1999	1994–1998	1998–2002	1994–1998	1998–2002	1994–1998	1998–2002	
Number of legislators who sponsored at least one bill	246	257	139	165	87	94	57	57	1102
Women's Issues	33	30	23	9	16	18	23	35	187
Children/Family	28	40	13	7	22	9	25	27	171
Education	44	66	67	72	42	29	56	75	451
Health	27	51	13	14	13	5	16	33	172
Economics	208	305	74	80	113	65	120	160	1125
Agriculture	28	49	23	18	22	19	34	38	231
Fiscal Affairs	45	61	11	17	21	13	27	51	246
Other Bills [†]	567	901	405	406	371	356	628	764	4398
Total number of bills initiated	980	1503	629	623	620	514	929	1183	6981

[†]“Other Bills” include all bills that do not fall into the seven thematic areas. This would include bills related to public administration, the environment, foreign affairs, culture, and public welfare, among others.

Legislators initiate bills for a variety of reasons, but one of the main ones is credit claiming (Crisp et al. 2004). They want to be able to take credit for bringing benefits to their district and/or votes to their political party and bill sponsorship is one way to do that.

As in the attitudinal analyses, I include a number of control variables to isolate the effect of gender. Two are operationalized identically to those used in the issue preference models—ideology and urban district.¹⁴ I also include level of development here, but it is measured as GDP per capita in constant 1995 U.S. dollars averaged across all years in a congressional term. Additionally, I include three variables assessing a legislator's position in the legislative chamber that could influence bill sponsorship patterns. First, I control for whether the legislator is a member of the largest party in the chamber.¹⁵ The largest party can set and control the legislative agenda and is better positioned to move legislation through the policy process. Thus, legislators from the largest party might be more likely to sponsor bills in thematic areas it

sees as important. Second, senior legislators have greater experience and knowledge of the workings of the chamber and may initiate more bills than junior legislators. I measure legislative experience as the total number of terms the legislator has served.¹⁶ Third, I account for committee membership to ensure that gender is not picking up the fact that women might be disproportionately situated on women's issue committees, for example, or the fact that legislators may be more likely to sponsor bills that will end up in their own committee. Committee membership is a dichotomous variable for whether or not the legislator sits on a committee dealing with bills in the thematic area of the dependent variable.¹⁷

¹⁶On the whole, legislators in Latin America do not exhibit long seniority patterns. The longest serving deputies in Argentina were in their fourth term, and only four deputies served that long. In Colombia, one legislator was in his eighth four-year term, but most were in their first or second term. In Costa Rica, 88% of deputies were in their first term. Term limits deter many legislators from seeking additional terms after sitting out four years. Average term length is 2.7 for Argentine deputies, 1.8 for Colombian senators and representatives, and 1.2 terms for Costa Rican deputies.

¹⁷In Colombia, a floor vote determines who sits on the seven permanent committees for the duration of the four-year congress and each legislator gets one assignment. In Costa Rica, the chamber president makes assignments to the six permanent committees annually, so I code legislators as sitting on a relevant committee if he or she did so in any of the four years of the congress. The Argentine Chamber has 45 committees and party leaders assign legislators to multiple committees for a two-year term. If any of the legislator's committee assignments deal with bills in the thematic area, then I code that legislator as sitting on a relevant committee.

¹⁴Age, education, and occupation are not in the bill initiation models because archival data on legislators' backgrounds are scant in Colombia and Costa Rica.

¹⁵In Argentina, the PJ was the largest party in all three terms studied in this article, holding from 45% to 49% of the seats. In both chambers and congresses in Colombia, the Liberals were the largest party and held a majority in all congresses except 1998–2002 in the Senate, where they held 48% of the seats. The PLN and PUSC alternated as the largest party with the PLN holding 49% of seats in 1994–98 and the PUSC with 51% of the seats in 1998–2002.

TABLE 3 Descriptive Statistics on Legislators' Bill Sponsorship by Thematic Area

	Legislators Who Did Not Sponsor Any Bills in the Thematic Area		Legislators Who Sponsored at Least One Bill in the Thematic Area		Number of Bills Sponsored (if > 0)		Percentage of Bills Sponsored (if > 0)	
	#	%	#	%	Range	Mean	Range	Mean
Women's Issues	863	78	239	22	1–8	1.8	1.1–50	9.2
Children/Family	919	83	183	17	1–7	1.6	1.0–100	11.0
Education	671	61	431	39	1–9	1.8	1.1–100	16.9
Health	871	79	231	21	1–6	1.6	1.4–50	8.2
Economics	403	37	699	63	1–35	3.7	2.6–100	23.7
Agriculture	796	72	306	28	1–9	2.0	1.1–100	13.6
Fiscal Affairs	763	69	339	31	1–21	1.8	1.1–100	11.0

I also control for differences in the legislative environment of each chamber, specifically, the incentives that legislators have to seek support from their constituents based on them as individuals or based on their party affiliation. This may be important because legislators operating under electoral incentives that encourage personal vote seeking may be more likely to promote women's issues as a way to distinguish themselves from other candidates or to court the women's vote. Legislators where rules encourage party-centered vote seeking would be much less likely to do so unless the party makes women's issues one of its major policy concerns, which very few Latin American political parties do.¹⁸

Finally, I include variables that control for the percentage of bills a legislator initiates out of all bills initiated in the chamber and the number of bills initiated in each legislative chamber as a percentage of the total number of bills in the data set. Some legislators initiate many bills while others just a few, in part because legislators vary in their political clout, the size of their staff, and the resources available to them. Otto Guevara Guth, an opposition party leader in the Costa Rican Assembly sponsored 148 bills in the 1998–2002 congress when the median was only 27! For similar reasons, some chambers have more bills initiated in them than others.

I analyze bill sponsorship patterns with the legislator as the unit of analysis and the dependent variable measured as the percentage of bills a legislator sponsors

that fall into each thematic area. In other words, it is the number of bills that a legislator sponsors in any given thematic area divided by the total number of bills a legislator sponsors during the congressional session (or year, in Argentina) multiplied by 100. For example, a legislator who initiates no women's issue bills is coded 0%, a legislator who sponsors five women's issue bills out of the 10 bills he or she initiated during the term would be coded 50%. This measures the priority that a legislator places on each thematic area within his or her overall policy agenda.¹⁹ Table 3 provides descriptive statistics on legislators' bill sponsorship patterns. The last two columns show the range and mean for the dependent variable.

I use tobit to analyze the data because they are censored at zero—no one can initiate a negative percentage of bills no matter how much they dislike a policy—and they cluster at zero—around 80% of legislators did not sponsor any bills in the areas of women's issues, children/family issues, and health (see the first column in Table 3). The clustering makes regular OLS estimates inconsistent by underestimating the intercept and overestimating the slope of the regression line. Tobit accounts for this and produces more consistent estimates. Further, tobit answers two questions at once. First, what explains the likelihood that legislators will initiate at least

¹⁸I measure personal vote-seeking incentives as suggested by Carey and Shugart (1995)—ballot, pool, vote, and party nomination procedures on a 0–2 ordinal scale (low to high personal vote-seeking incentives) interacted with district magnitude. This coding ensures within chamber variation so that personal vote-seeking incentives is not just a country dummy variable.

¹⁹I estimated two alternative models. In one, the raw number of bills is the dependent variable (Bratton 2002). In the other, I group the number of bills into categories of 0, 1, and 2 or more (Swers 2002) to be sure that the skewness of the continuous dependent variable towards "0" is not biasing the results (see Table 3). The results of all three models are very similar, and in both of the other sets of models, the statistical significance of gender is even stronger than what I present below. However, I present the models with the dependent variable measured as a percentage because the percentage better captures the *priority* legislators place on a specific thematic area as a function of their broader policy agenda (Jones 1997; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003).

TABLE 4 Determinants of the Percentage of Bills Legislators Initiate in Various Thematic Areas (Unit of Analysis Is a Legislator)

	Women's Issues	Children and Family	Education	Health	Economy	Agriculture	Fiscal Affairs
Gender	11.40** (1.61)	5.55 [†] (2.94)	6.99** (2.70)	3.30* (1.62)	-5.66** (2.16)	-7.12* (2.82)	-3.72 [†] (2.05)
Ideology	-.06 (2.09)	-1.76 (3.80)	-2.86 (3.70)	-.29 (2.15)	-.27 (2.86)	4.96 (3.45)	1.08 (2.56)
Committee Assignment	7.29** (1.74)	11.85** (3.16)	12.13** (2.80)	4.17* (1.77)	-.30 (1.86)	15.78** (2.71)	6.98** (1.78)
Legislative Experience	.15 (.54)	-.46 (.99)	1.41 [†] (.82)	.46 (.51)	.56 (.63)	-.94 (.84)	.09 (.60)
Urban District	2.03 (1.54)	2.52 (2.75)	1.04 (2.46)	-1.71 (1.48)	-2.65 (1.88)	-10.33** (2.29)	.41 (1.74)
Member of Largest Party	-2.12 (1.47)	-1.06 (2.60)	.75 (2.38)	-3.38* (1.47)	1.25 (1.89)	-.45 (2.32)	-2.60 (1.74)
Total Percentage of Bills Initiated by Legislators	3.64** (.44)	3.38** (.74)	1.33* (.67)	2.88** (.43)	3.03** (.54)	3.76** (.65)	3.93** (.50)
Total Percentage of Bills Initiated in Chamber	-.18 (.27)	1.09* (.50)	.57 (.46)	.68* (.27)	-.22 (.34)	.95* (.42)	-.03 (.31)
Personal Vote-Seeking Incentives	-.005 (.013)	.001 (.022)	-.03 [†] (.02)	.005 (.012)	.02 (.01)	-.01 (.02)	.02 (.01)
GDP per capita	.0017** (.0004)	.0003 (.0009)	-.002* (.001)	.0009 [†] (.0004)	.004** (.001)	.0001 (.0001)	.003** (.001)
Constant	-30.60** (3.79)	-52.03** (6.85)	-16.14** (5.18)	-31.57** (3.78)	-11.95** (3.99)	-31.61* (5.22)	-34.71** (4.20)
Log Likelihood	-1230.49	-1092.46	-2405.96	-1205.36	-3527.28	-1703.97	-1772.02
Chi-square	234.60	94.97	54.69	163.54	137.83	163.00	175.45
Number of Censored Observations	863	919	671	871	403	796	763

Tobit estimates with standard errors in parentheses. [†]p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01.
n = 1102.

one bill in the thematic area? And second, if they do, what explains the fact that, for example, Viviane Morales in the Colombian Chamber of Representatives, 1994–98, sponsored half of her 12 bills on women's issues while Juan Brenes, a deputy during the same period in Costa Rica, sponsored only one of his 50 bills (2%) on women's issues?

Table 4 shows that significant gender differences exist for all seven thematic areas. Women are more likely to initiate women's issues, children/family, education, and health bills, and a larger percentage of the bills women initiate are in these areas. They are significantly less likely to sponsor bills on the economy, agriculture, and fiscal affairs, and when women do sponsor those types of bills, they comprise a smaller percentage of their total bills initiated. The substantive effect of gender is more

complicated to discern. Tobit coefficients cannot be interpreted like OLS estimates because the tobit model is nonlinear (Greene 1997; Sigelman and Zeng 1999). Thus, it is necessary to compute the marginal effect of gender on bill sponsorship while holding continuous variables at their mean and dichotomous variables at their mode. Table 5 shows predicted probabilities and the corresponding difference in the proportion of bills sponsored by men and women in each thematic area. In the most extreme disparity, women initiate 10.5% more women's issues bills than do men. The gender gap is smaller, though still substantial, ranging from 3.0% to 4.7% for the other thematic areas. As hypothesized, bill initiation behavior yields gender differences in areas that can be categorized along the traditional distinction between "men's domain" and "women's domain."

TABLE 5 Predicted Percentage of Bills Initiated in Each Thematic Area[†]

	Women's Issues	Children/ Family Issues	Education	Health	Economy	Agriculture	Fiscal Affairs
Women	27.3	30.4	17.5	18.8	19.1	11.6	21.4
Men	16.8	25.7	13.3	21.8	23.4	15.9	24.6
<i>Marginal Effect</i>	10.5	4.7	4.2	3.0	-4.3	-4.3	-3.3

[†]Predicted probabilities for gender's effect on bill sponsorship calculated from tobit models in Table 4 holding continuous variables at their mean and dichotomous variables at their mode.

The effect of gender is strongly significant even after accounting for other influences on bill initiation patterns. The most consistently significant factor is committee assignments. Legislators who sit on a committee in the thematic area are more likely to sponsor legislation in that area. This holds for all thematic areas except economics. This may be because of the large number of economic bills that get initiated in each congress (see Table 2), far more than could be sponsored just by legislators on economy-focused committees. Not surprisingly, representatives of rural districts initiate more agriculture bills than those from urban districts. Legislators in more developed countries sponsor more women's issue, health, economic, and fiscal bills, while sponsoring fewer education bills. This contrasts with the findings for attitudes where more developed countries were *less* likely to place high priority on women's issue bills and the differences for most of the other thematic areas were not significant. Finally, the two controls for the proportions of bills legislators initiate overall and the proportions in each chamber are significant in most models.²⁰

As with attitudes, ideology does not matter in any of the bill initiation models. An interaction between ideology and gender was significant for health bills only (models not shown). It reveals that women are slightly less likely to sponsor health bills than men with the same ideological tendency, but women on the right sponsor 8% fewer health bills than women on the left. Health bills also were an anomaly for the effect of being in the largest party (Table 4). Being a member of the largest party depresses the priority legislators place on health. I tested for an interaction between gender and membership in the largest party, and it too was only significant in the health models (not shown). Among legislators in the largest party, women sponsor 6.3% more health bills than men. Gender differences in the opposition party were statistically

insignificant. One reason that health bills stand out here is that sometimes they are considered a more important issue area. In Argentina, for example, the Health committee is one of the major committees in the chamber comparable to Appropriations, Foreign Affairs, and Defense, among others (Jones et al. 2002). The more important the issue, the more likely men in the largest party might be to sponsor those bills themselves.

Gender differences in bill initiation patterns are significant after accounting for the varying socioeconomic and political environments of the countries. Again, to be sure that the cross-national results are not driven by gender differences in just one or two countries or one of the two time periods, I disaggregated the data by chamber and congress (models not shown). The disaggregated results reveal some variation in the effect of gender across countries, as they did for attitudes. However, no one country appears to be systematically biasing the results, as even within countries, gender is more salient during some terms than others. For example, female legislators in Costa Rica prioritize children and family bills more than men did during the 1998–2002 congress but not during the 1994–98 congress. In Argentina, gender is not significant for children/family, health, or economic bills in 1995 but is significant for health and the economy in 1999. This may result from the increase in female deputies up to 19% from 14% in Costa Rica and up from 15% to 29% in Argentina.²¹ With more women in the chamber, male deputies may perceive a greater need to marginalize women and maintain their dominance on traditionally male issues. Fortunately, by including multiple countries,

²⁰The percentage of bills initiated in a chamber and GDP per capita correlate at 0.87, which is probably why the percentage of bills in the chamber is significant when GDP per capita is not and vice versa.

²¹I was unable to control for the percentage of women in the chamber or an interaction between percentage of women and gender because, with only eight different observations, it correlates at 0.98 with the percentage of bills sponsored in each chamber. I suspect that the larger proportion of bills is the dominant influence. The theory that legislators in chambers that sponsor more bills should initiate more bills in each thematic area, regardless of its content, is stronger than the idea that increasing the proportion of women should make any legislator (male or female) more likely to sponsor a bill in *all* thematic areas.

TABLE 6 Models Accounting for Partisanship and Gender of Bill Cosponsors (Unit of Analysis Is a Bill Signature)

	Women's Issues	Children/ Family	Education	Health	Economy	Agriculture	Fiscal Affairs
Gender	1.12** (.25)	.41 [†] (.22)	.25 [†] (.15)	.21 (.17)	-.31** (.07)	-.38** (.13)	-.38** (.15)
Same party as other signers	-.10 (.32)	-.02 (.37)	.11* (.26)	-.21 (.34)	-.002 (.14)	-1.22** (.29)	.48 [†] (.28)
Same gender as other signers	-.31 (.41)	.40 (.38)	.07 (.25)	.36 (.31)	.37* (.15)	.35 (.27)	.44 [†] (.24)
Constant	-4.04** (.69)	-6.21** (.77)	-4.75** (.47)	-6.09** (.62)	-2.83** (.32)	-3.92** (.61)	-4.79** (.61)
Log likelihood	-1357.61	-773.44	-1751.18	-1136.04	-4834.11	-1782.73	-1805.21
Chi-square	164.71	152.58	101.37	57.76	60.45	128.82	54.44

Logit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses and clustering of standard errors on the bill. Models also include control variables—ideology, urban district, legislative experience, committee assignments, plurality party membership, total number of bills legislator introduced, total number of bills introduced into the chamber, personal vote-seeking incentives, and GDP per capita.

[†]p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01.
n = 11,660.

congresses, and chambers within countries in this article, the results show the effect of gender across these units rather than revealing findings based on one particular place and time.

An important note about the data and the models in Table 4 is that they do not distinguish between primary sponsors and cosponsors. In part, this is because two of the three countries do not do so in their own congressional records, as mentioned previously. Therefore, the models assume that a legislator's decision to sign a bill is the same regardless of whether there are other sponsors or not. Yet additional factors may influence cosponsorship decisions, such as party affiliation or the gender of other signers. Legislators may be more likely to sign bills when they are the primary sponsor or sponsoring with members of their own party. Similarly, the gender of other sponsors may matter. A man may be less likely to sponsor a women's issue bill if all of the other sponsors on that bill are women. A woman may avoid getting involved in or be shunned from an economics bill when all of the sponsors are men. A full specification of the decision to cosponsor a bill and the role that gender plays in it goes far beyond this article both theoretically and because of data limitations. However, I can examine this to some degree by reconfiguring the data set and testing whether the effects of gender found previously are biased because of omitted cosponsorship variables.

Since Colombia and Costa Rica do not distinguish primary sponsors from cosponsors, I cannot examine cosigners only. However, I can separate bills with only

one sponsor from bills with multiple sponsors and analyze cosponsored bills accounting for relevant characteristics of other signers. Still, on cosponsored bills, it is impossible to make a distinction between the primary sponsor and the true cosponsors. I estimate models where the unit of analysis is a bill signature and the dependent variable is a dichotomous measure of whether or not a legislator signs onto a bill in a specific thematic area. Each legislator can be in the data set multiple times for each bill that he or she sponsors, and bills can appear repeatedly, once for each sponsor. This yields 11,660 observations. Now, I can control for two important factors missing from the previous models—party affiliation and gender of *other* sponsors. Table 6 shows the results of these models for the key variables discussed here, though the controls from Table 4 were in the models as well.

Gender differences persist for women's issues, economics, agriculture, and fiscal affairs bills but are less pronounced for children and family, education, and health bills. Coefficients are in the expected direction but significance levels drop to $p = 0.06$, $p = 0.09$, and $p = 0.22$, respectively. The reason for this may be that fewer bills in these areas are cosponsored as compared to the number cosponsored in other thematic areas. Only 22% of children and family bills, 21% of education bills, and 30% of health bills have multiple signers compared to 33% for women's issues and economic bills, 35% for agriculture bills, and 37% for fiscal affairs. Thus, gender differences may be less significant on these cosponsored bills because cosponsorship is less common.

Partisan effects emerge only for education, agriculture, and fiscal bills. A legislator is more likely to sign an education bill or fiscal affairs bill if the other sponsors are from the same party but *less* likely to sign an agriculture bill with copartisans than with members of other parties. The nature of agriculture policy may explain this because it generally focuses on specific regions of a country, and within multimember districts, which all three countries have, it is common to have representatives from multiple parties. These legislators are willing to cross party lines to sponsor legislation that directly targets their district.

Table 6 also shows that gender effects exist for economic and fiscal bills. Legislators of the same sex are more likely to initiate each type of bill. While women are less likely to sponsor economic and fiscal bills than men, they will do so when the other cosponsors are all women. Vice versa, men are more likely to sponsor these bills with other men rather than in cross-gender groupings. This provides additional evidence that some form of gender segregation or marginalization occurs in the legislature. Men seek out other men when looking for cosponsors on economic and fiscal bills, and when female legislators want to work on those kinds of bills, they do so with other women.

Without a fully specified model of cosponsorship and data distinguishing primary sponsors from cosponsors, these conclusions are tentative. But they do underscore the robustness of the findings that gender affects bill initiation behavior and that women sponsor more bills in “women’s domain” while men focus more on issues in “men’s domain.” The next step is to determine what these findings combined with those on issue preferences mean for legislative representation in Latin America.

Conclusions

This study’s findings provide answers to three important questions about women and legislative representation. First, how and why do male and female legislators differ in their attitudes and bill initiation behavior? Gender differences in attitudes exist for some issue areas but become more widespread for bill initiation behavior. Women place higher priority on women’s issues and children/family issues, and they place lower priority on agriculture and employment. Some of these preferences translate into behavior as female legislators initiate more women’s issues and children/family bills and initiate fewer agriculture bills. Gender differences do not exist in attitudes toward education, health, or the economy, but significant disparities emerge when legislators initiate bills in these thematic areas. These findings support the theory that women are marginalized in the legislative arena. Just as women in

Latin America are isolated on traditional “women’s domain” committees (Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, and Taylor-Robinson 2005), they also are marginalized in the kinds of legislation they sponsor. Male legislators focus on the often more important “men’s domain” issues while women are pressured to stick to issues in “women’s domain.”

A second key question is whether the gender differences found in Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica are generalizable to Latin America and perhaps comparable to findings in the United States and Western Europe. This study is based on three diverse countries with multiple observations in each country—either in terms of chamber or congress. Further, the countries offer relatively diverse environments in Latin America in which to test for differences between male and female legislators. The statistical models control for a myriad of other influences on legislators’ attitudes and behavior to increase confidence that the gender differences that emerge are in fact due to gender and not other explanations. All of this helps make the findings generalizable across Latin America. However, it will be important for future research to examine other countries and longer time frames within countries to strengthen these assertions.

Comparisons to the United States and Western Europe help to determine whether gender’s effects might be applicable beyond Latin America. Do commonalities exist in how women legislate across cultures, types of democracy, and levels of development? The changes in women’s status in Latin America in recent years suggest that female legislators in Latin America may be similar to their counterparts in the developed world, and both are likely to face a similar degree of marginalization in the legislative arena. The most consistent finding across regions is that women are significantly more likely to prioritize women’s issues and children/family concerns in both attitudes and bill initiation behavior (Dodson and Carroll 1991; Jones 1997; Norris 1996; Reingold 2000; Saldías 1982; Swers 2002; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003; Thomas 1994; Thomas and Welch 1991; Wangnerud 2000; Zambrano 1998). Regardless of whether the woman is a legislator in progressive Scandinavia or traditional Latin America, she places greater priority than her male counterparts on feminist issues and concern for children and the family. It is more difficult to compare findings on social issues and on issues traditionally considered “men’s domain” because of mixed findings in other studies and the limited attention given to economics, agriculture, employment, and fiscal affairs in those studies. Dodson and Carroll (1991) and Thomas (1991) find significant gender differences on attitudes toward health issues in U.S. state legislatures, but Reingold (2000) does not in her study of self-stated policy priorities among legislators in Arizona and California. Similarly, Dodson and Carroll (1991) find

no gender differences in attitudes toward education while Thomas (1991) finds differences for bill priorities. Norris (1996) finds modest differences on social issues from a survey of MP's in Great Britain. A couple of early studies of U.S. state legislatures found women less likely than men to state that budget, tax, and business/economic issues were important priorities (Dodson and Carroll 1991; Thomas and Welch 1991). Thus, while gender differences in attitudes and behavior toward women's issues are generalizable across levels of economic and political development and different cultures, it is less clear for social issues and "men's domain" issues.

The third and biggest question that this study addresses is whether female legislators in Latin America are still "supermadres." The findings of this study imply that the answer is no. Societal changes in sex roles in recent years have merged women's and men's issue preferences such that they now are equally likely to prioritize the feminine issues of education and health and the "men's domain" issue, the economy. That differences reemerge for bill initiation behavior in these areas at first may appear contradictory. However, this behavior is not because women prefer or dislike these issues but because unfriendly legislative environments push them into these traditional roles. Also contrary to the idea of women as "supermadres" is that they promote feminist issues (i.e., women's issues) more so than men. While many women in Latin America still shun the word "feminist," they see feminist issues of women's equality and antidiscrimination as very important. The supermadre was more concerned with feminine issues than feminist ones. Thus, the evidence here does not support continued characterization of women in Latin American politics as supermadres.

The answers to these questions have implications for the broader concern with legislative representation in Latin America. While women are entering national legislatures in larger numbers, they have not been accepted into the legislative arena on equal terms with men. Disparities in men's and women's bill initiation patterns show that women still face marginalization in their political activities, making it impossible for them to translate their political preferences into legislative action. They are unable to do their job of representing constituents and creating policy to the same extent as men. Despite many gains in the political arena, women continue to lack full representation in Latin American democracies.

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