



Women's Voice in American Politics

Kristin Anne Goss, Duke University

Throughout much of the 20th century, American women's organizations championed broad concerns ranging from strengthening public education and care for the vulnerable, to environmentalism, international peace, civil rights, and electoral reform. But in recent times, women's organizations have become a weaker presence. They focus on specialized concerns and are often regarded as marginal, special-interest players on the national political scene.

How did this happen, and why should we care? A recent study probes women's national political advocacy from 1878 to 2000 by tracking 10,400 instances of women's organizations testifying before Congress. The groups that testified and the causes they espoused offer a unique window into women's advocacy and help us to unravel the causes and consequences of seismic shifts in the agendas and authority of American women.

The Rise and Fall of Women's Groups on Capitol Hill

The conventional wisdom about women in public life goes something like this: In the early 20th century, feisty activists with big hats and bold signs mobilized to the right to vote – think “the suffragette.” The next generation squandered the victory by embracing wifely and motherly devotion at home – think June Cleaver. There women stayed until the feminist equal rights movement erupted in the 1970s, taking them out of the kitchen and into public life – think Hillary Clinton. Unfortunately, this narrative gets the story of women's *collective* engagement in public life almost exactly wrong.

Far from retreating into private life, organized women in the post-suffrage era charged into the halls of power and played a pivotal role in debates about the most important domestic and foreign policy legislation. The authority of women's associations peaked during the supposedly placid 1950s and 1960s. In contrast, after the women's movement of the 1970s, women's groups faded. By the late 1990s, they became less prominent on Capitol Hill than they had been before the right to vote was secured in 1920.

A Narrowing of Public Voice and Authority

The policy agendas of women's groups moved from broad advocacy in “the public interest” to lobbying for special rights.

- From the 1920s through the 1960s, women's groups spoke to an expanding array of issues – from education to international affairs, immigration, health care, retirement policy, civil rights, and the environment.
- To convey their political authority, women's groups often drew on narratives of maternal care and good citizenship, which resonated with women's roles as mothers and caregivers and leveraged popular perceptions of their special civic virtue.
- From the 1970s, however, women's groups narrowed their emphasis to advocating specifically for female rights, status, and wellbeing. Maternal and civic narratives gave way to justifications rooted in professional expertise and occupational advancement.

What Drove Changes in Women's Advocacy?

Multipurpose, mass-membership associations, which spoke for tens of millions of women, aged and faded from the Washington scene. Smaller feminist groups blazed through Capitol Hill hearing rooms in the 1970s through the early 1980s, but then declined in prominence. Women's groups that arose in the “post-feminist” era were small and focused on niche causes. For several reasons, women's organizations, taken together, lost breadth, size, and national clout:

- **Professionalization and specialization** took hold for all kinds of U.S. interest groups in the late 20th century, and women's groups were forced to adapt. Volunteerism and inclusive member activities declined.
- The movement of **mothers and educated women** into the paid labor force left them unable to put large amounts of time into associational life, and at the same time boosted women's reliance on occupational and professional groups.
- **Public policy** in the 1970s and after acknowledged that women were an aggrieved group and created incentives for them to organize around gender-equality claims. When further policies addressed some of the most glaring injustices, organized activism ironically lost some of its special impetus.
- **Changing norms** and values attenuated women's sense of their special place in public life. First, maternal understandings faded; and then feminist advocacy won key victories and came to seem less important. U.S. women gained individual options yet lost strong moral foundations to justify their shared civic activism and authority.

Why the Faltering of Authoritative Women's Groups Should Concern Us

- Women learn valuable civic skills in women's groups – more so than in mixed-gender organizations – and these skills help launch females into political leadership.
- Mixed-gender groups mostly remain male dominated and often fail to articulate or implement women's distinctive views. This matters, because women tend to hold more progressive views on issues such as health care, gun control, and international cooperation.
- Females remain a minority in public office (e.g., just 17% of the House and Senate in 2012), and studies show that women's groups are key in urging these lawmakers to champion women's concerns and supporting the lawmakers when they do so.

Read more in Kristin A. Goss, *The Paradox of Gender Equality: How American Women's Groups Gained and Lost Their Public Voice* (University of Michigan Press, 2012).