

Speaking Up, Speaking More? Female Participation in Congressional Committees

Pamela Ban, Justin Grimmer, and Jaclyn Kaslovsky

Harvard University and the University of Chicago

Introduction

- Studies of descriptive representative often examine the gender composition of political institutions, finding that as legislators, women may behave differently than men
- Previous experimental research show that women are less likely to participate in group settings when there are fewer women present and the group is making majority decisions
- We examine how the gender distribution on a committee affects the participation rates and styles of women in congressional hearings
- **Method and data:** generalized difference-in-differences design, transcripts of committee hearings, and various text-based outcomes from speech
- **Women's participation rates and styles in committee hearings are not affected by the gender distribution on the committee**
- **Suggests that gender imbalance in Congress does not hinder female participation during the committee process**
- **Next steps:** is this driven by selection? Do campaigns and progressive ambition reward women who are similarly as aggressive and who participate at similar rates as men?

Female Representation on Congressional Committees

The average percent of women on congressional committees ranges from 0 to a little over 40 percent, with no committee ever reaching equal representation. There is substantial variation in the proportion of women who are members.

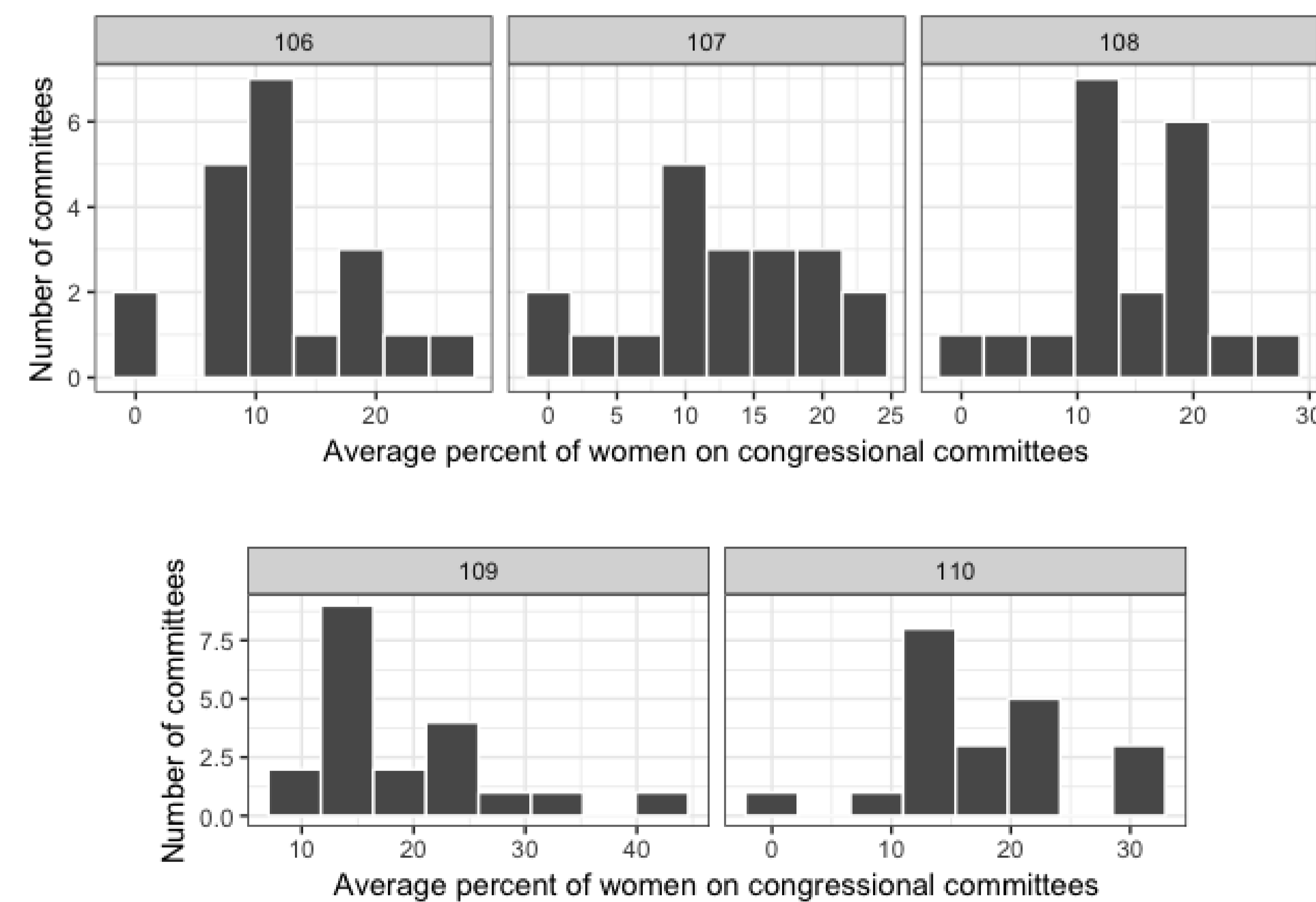


Figure 1: Percent of Women on Congressional Committees, 106th to 110th Houses

The variation in female representation in the committee system is also demonstrated by Figure 2, which displays the percentage of women on key congressional committees over time. The committees on Appropriations, Budget, Rules, and Ways and Means stand out as being unique gateways to power and respect in Congress. All percentages remain below 35% across the period of study.

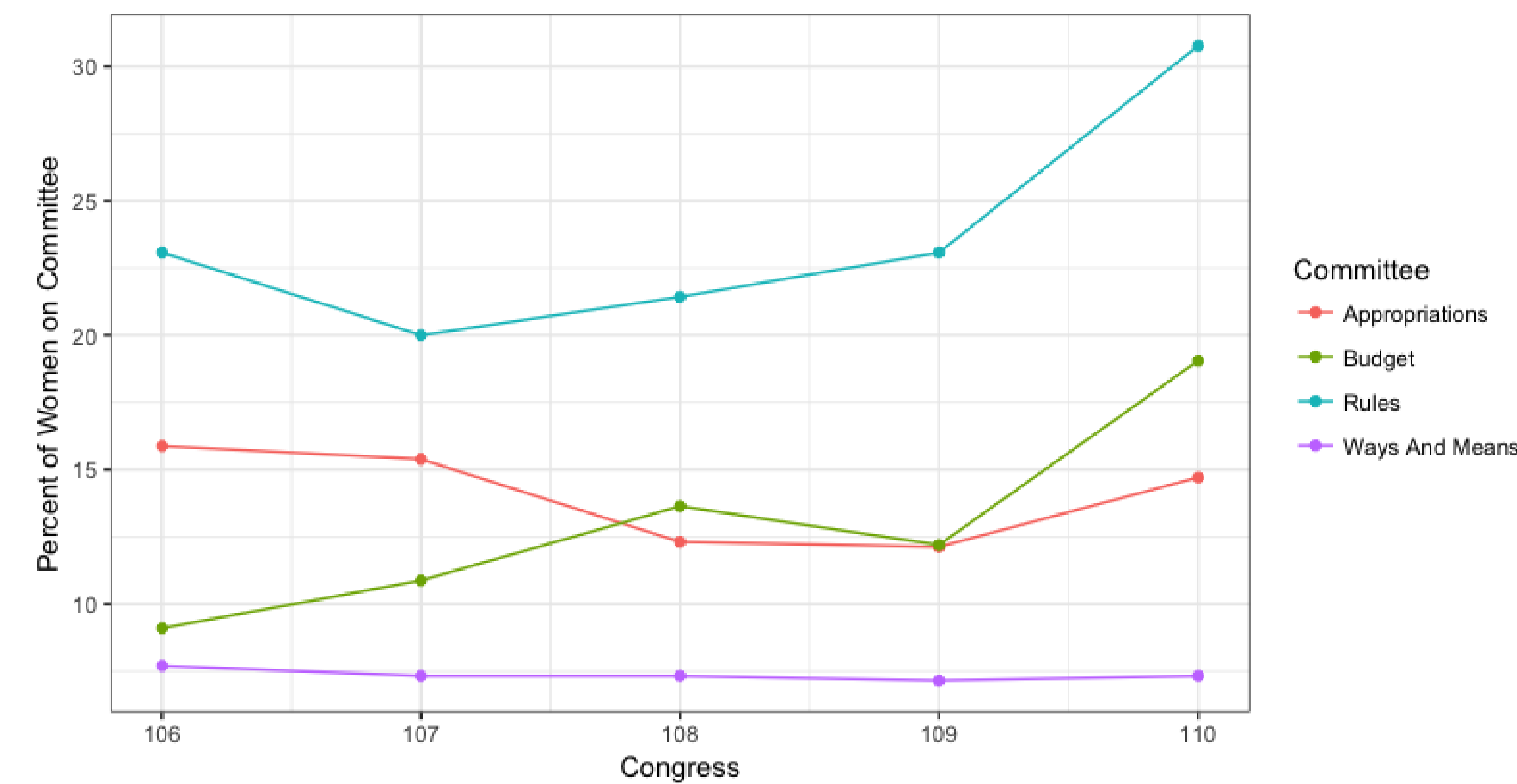


Figure 2: Percent of Women on Important Congressional Committees, 106th to 110th Houses

Committee Hearings

We measure our text-based outcomes of interest from transcripts of congressional committee hearings. Data on committee hearings comes from Ban (2018) and includes all House standing committee hearing transcripts during the period 1999-2008. These House committee hearing transcripts made available by the U.S. Government Publishing Office.

Outcome variables

Participation: frequencies and length of speech

- Percent of hearings attended
- Percent times a member speaks during a hearing
- Percent words a member speaks in a hearing

Sentiment: dictionary of positive and negative words

- Percent of positive words
- Percent of negative words

Aggression: dictionary of aggressive words, number of interruptions

- Percent of angry words
- Percent of yields
- Percent of allowing time

Specification

$$Y_{it} = \beta_1 \text{Percent of Women on Committee} + \gamma Z_{it} + \alpha_i + \mu_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

- All standard errors are clustered at the member-committee level.
- Z_{it} represents the time-varying legislator controls, including majority party status, committee chairmanship and sub-chairmanship status, DW-NOMINATE score, previous vote percentage, and membership on key committees.
- α_i represents member-committee fixed effects
- μ_t represents Congress fixed effects
- ε_{it} is the error term.

Table 2: Speaking Patterns by Gender

	Women		Men	
	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
Panel A: Percent Times Spoken per Hearing				
Percent of Women on Committee	0.112 (0.093)	0.086 (0.088)	0.079 (0.063)	0.049 (0.059)
Constant	0.009 (0.015)	0.031 (0.035)	0.032* (0.008)	0.029 (0.015)
Panel B: Percent Words Spoken per Hearing				
Percent of Women on Committee	0.042 (0.118)	-0.008 (0.107)	0.000 (0.076)	-0.035 (0.072)
Constant	0.011 (0.018)	0.060 (0.040)	0.032* (0.010)	0.032 (0.017)
Panel C: Percent Hearings Spoken In				
Percent of Women on Committee	-0.097 (0.157)	-0.082 (0.156)	-0.145 (0.095)	-0.149 (0.097)
Constant	0.088* (0.026)	0.064 (0.091)	0.135* (0.015)	0.147* (0.034)
All Controls		✓		✓
Member-Committee fixed effects		✓		✓
Congress fixed effects		✓		✓
Observations	580	580	3528	3528

Table 3: Positive and Negative Words by Gender

	Women		Men	
	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
Panel A: Percent Words Positive				
Percent of Women on Committee	0.023 (0.021)	0.019 (0.022)	0.009 (0.010)	0.008 (0.011)
Constant	0.010* (0.003)	0.013 (0.008)	0.014* (0.002)	0.014* (0.003)
Panel B: Percent Words Negative				
Percent of Women on Committee	0.003 (0.012)	-0.002 (0.012)	0.001 (0.006)	0.001 (0.006)
Constant	0.006* (0.002)	0.004 (0.004)	0.008* (0.001)	0.008* (0.002)
All Controls		✓		✓
Member-Committee fixed effects		✓		✓
Congress fixed effects		✓		✓
Observations	580	580	3528	3528

Conclusions

- Women in Congress do not appear to be affected by decision rules in the same way as women in the general population
- We find no significant effects for female legislators across any of our outcomes
- We next investigate whether there is a selection effect occurring. Women who are elected to Congress may be undeterred by gender composition as they have already likely faced substantial gender-based adversity to be elected