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2009 GENDER IN THE WORKPLACE RESEARCH INITIATIVE

Gender, Politics, and the Media: Female Governors' Executive Approach to Reproductive Rights

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OVERVIEW OF PROBLEM/ISSUE

Our central research question asks how recent Republican and Democratic female governors have handled the issue of reproductive rights. We ask whether their treatment of the issue reflects their gender identity, and in which environments it is able to override their political and religious identities. As politicians, they are undoubtedly influenced by the ideological 'frame' of their party. Yet gender may affect their ability and efforts to reconcile personal beliefs with their capacity to enact policy.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We observe the explicit weighing of gender, party and religion in two contexts. First, we conducted a media content analysis of official biographies, press releases, signing statements and voting records, as well as news articles (nearly 375 publications in total). This material was reviewed qualitatively, for significant trends and examples, as well as coded quantitatively. To account for any media bias that may present itself in such material, however, we will test our initial findings with a questionnaire sent directly to the governors, which provides them the opportunity to answer our questions candidly and without a filter. The questionnaire has been sent to the 12 female governors who held office between 2000 and 2008, and the collected responses will be included in our final research publication .

FINDINGS

The female governors studied most relied upon cues from their respective political parties and religions in their approach to reproductive rights. Notably, gender played the greatest informative role only when party ideology and religious doctrine were framed in opposition with each other. For Republican governors, whose political and religious beliefs seemed more overtly congruous, there was rarely a 'forced choice' to make. Yet Democratic women not only faced choices, as was the case for Catholic and Pro-Choice governors, but they suffered consequences as a result of their decisions. Further, Democratic women most often discussed reproductive rights as a 'woman's issue,' while Republicans muted the gendered aspect of the issue in favor of religious or partisan rhetoric. Democrats also asserted a disconnect between their personal beliefs and their capacity to enact policy as governor, while Republicans defined their office as a platform for promoting values. Finally, the chosen terms employed in official materials and news articles holds great significance for the direction of the conversation. The terms 'pro-life,' 'pro-choice,' and 'anti-abortion' are charged with implicit value judgments which may not accurately reflect the sentiments of the different view points, but have been crafted to further the political divide and promote one's cause against the other.

IMPLICATIONS

Our study reveals how reproductive rights, a women's issue, is handled by women leaders occupying positions traditionally dominated by men. In that sense, the challenges they face are representative of those faced by many executive women, and the examples set provide inspiration for future generations. Our findings also demonstrate the extent to which women politicians take ownership of this topic, and the central role they play in the resolution of conflict between the "pro" and "anti" sides. Finally, the results of the debate, as well as the process in which outcomes are decided, holds tangible policy implications for all Americans.