
HOW WOMEN LEGISLATE by Sue Thomas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994)

In *How Women Legislate*,¹ Sue Thomas studies women legislators in various U.S. states primarily from two periods, the early 1970s and the late 1980s. To study women representatives in the 1970s, Thomas reviews gender politics literature, and analyses the activities of women representatives, especially their policy priorities. To examine the women legislators of the 1980s, Thomas conducted surveys of women and men in twelve diverse states² and personally interviewed women representatives in six of those states. On the basis of her review of the existing literature on women officeholders, Thomas identifies three stages in the exploration of the behaviour of women in legislative office. In the first stage, the sociological characteristics of women representatives were studied; in the second stage, the attitudes of women legislators about themselves and their role in the political arena were canvassed. Finally, in the third stage, scholars and journalists have discovered gender differences among politicians and are continuing to study the impact women representatives are having on politics. Thomas' study is part of and builds on this third stage. Her book questions the significance of women's impact, explores the conditions under which it is enhanced, and examines how that impact ought to be judged.

In chapter one, Thomas explores gender politics and political science literature for insights into women's possible impact in office. Underlying these works, she finds a number of unstated and often contradictory assumptions that seem to colour the findings. Thomas deconstructs and reconstructs this research by means of a three stage process. In the first, she categorizes the works into one of four categories of expectations, what she terms a dual-continuum typology of expectations. One dimension of this typology categorizes the research according to the author's view on whether women in office "adapt to existing political practices or reform them."³ The other dimension of the continuum deals with the author's view on the legislative products or outcomes (the bills) that women achieve and whether the authors assume they ought to reflect different concerns.

Thomas' second step is to discern why authors have held these disparate and conflicting underlying assumptions about women representatives. Of the three reasons that she considers, Thomas believes that only one is satisfying; namely, societal indecision about women's proper role in the public sphere. Because this matter is not yet resolved, women legislators have had little flexibility in which to act, although the margins, she notes, have continually expanded. Thomas holds fast to this explanation because it is the only answer which "illuminates individual choices and collective action of modern political women ... [and has] the capability of predicting future actions of women officeholders."⁴ Ultimately, she contends, the debate about women's proper role

¹ S. Thomas, *How Women Legislate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

² *Ibid.* at 43: Arizona, California, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, S. Dakota, Vermont and Washington.

³ *Ibid.* at 10.

⁴ *Ibid.* at 5.

is unresolvable because it deals with questions about women's "true" character and since these questions are essentialist in nature, "we have no realistic way to answer ... [them] fully."⁵ But even if such questions could be answered, Thomas laments, there would be no consensus on what those answers mean for women in legislative office.

The focus of chapter two is whether the empirical evidence indicates that women in office alter legislative procedures. Thomas finds that the women who were the subject matter of earlier studies (early 1970s) tended to withdraw from active participation in legislative processes and did not attempt to alter procedures. Later, women representatives increased their participation levels and expanded their range of typical activities, but they still adapted to procedures rather than working to change them. At present, the participation levels of women are about equal to those of men, the backgrounds men and women bring to office are more similar than they were in the 1970s, sex discrimination has lessened, and women "have increasingly chosen to participate in all aspects of legislative life."⁶ From these changes, Thomas draws the conclusion that: the "wider societal debate about women's place in the public sphere has affected the way women have behaved in the political arena. As society expands its view about the extent to which women ought to participate women themselves have responded by extending their range of involvement."⁷ However, at this point, it is not possible, she thinks, to determine whether women will eventually change legislative procedures. This is so because change must be preceded by women being comfortable with the present procedures, by their mastering of those procedures, and by their overcoming the effects of discrimination. Thomas claims that these conditions might occur in the future and that reform might eventually occur.

In chapter three, Thomas uses empirical data to explore her central question: whether women officeholders have had different legislative agendas and produced different results from their male counterparts. She thinks that the answer is yes and notes that women participated in and contributed more to legislative policy as the societal views about women's proper role in the public sphere expanded. But since the debate surrounding women's proper role is ongoing, Thomas argues, women still concentrate most frequently on traditional areas of concern (issues of women, children and families) even though they have expanded their efforts to almost every sphere. Another result of the fact that this debate is not yet resolved is that women deal with these "private sphere" matters by turning them into public policy questions. By doing so, Thomas argues, women are "ensur[ing] their full and continuing role in legislative life."⁸

In chapter four, Thomas shows that women develop different policy priorities as the flexibility society accords them expands. This flexibility for women to act on their unique perspectives is related to their reaching a "critical mass" in the statehouse, which she suggests is somewhere above 31 percent of legislative membership, and to their developing support mechanisms and women's caucuses. When that level of critical

⁵ *Ibid.* at 12.

⁶ *Ibid.* at 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.* at 7.

mass is reached, women will be more able to resist institutional forces, will be more likely to pursue their different policy priorities and they will be better able to influence their male counterparts to take up these concerns as well. According to Thomas, if women comprise 10 percent or less of a statehouse, their distinctive contributions tend to amount to very little. Women in such situations seem to be immobilized by conformity pressures.

In chapter five, Thomas illustrates that women officeholders would like to make changes in the legislative process to make it more cooperative and less competitive, "more a process by which everyone can participate and as many people as possible can emerge with something to praise."⁹ She claims that women have adapted to legislative procedures because of institutional resistance and because such resistance cannot itself be resisted without a concerted effort from a core of the members of the legislature. Without that support, efforts at changing legislative pressures would be doomed to failure and the cost of such a failure could be high, she thinks. In these circumstances, Thomas claims, it is easy to understand why women adapt rather than work for reform. Based on her study of previous legislative reforms, Thomas believes that long term change will be gradual (if it occurs at all) and will require that the groundwork such as increased representation, is laid in advance. She recommends that women work for these things first.

In chapter six, Thomas evaluates the impact of women in office. Her standard of measurement is women's own goals, both individual and group based, and she concludes that the impact has been substantial and distinctive, and quickly achieved. In chapter seven, Thomas offers her predictions for the future by extrapolating from the data she has uncovered in her study and the situations of two boards comprised entirely of women, namely, the Missoula Montana County Commissioners in 1985 and the Multnomah Oregon County Board of Supervisors in 1986. She concludes that in this environment of greater flexibility, these women were able to introduce new issues and formulate policy in innovative ways. But while she thinks that the overall quality of their work was excellent, these women still had to battle stereotypical notions of women's capabilities from all of the county's top political actors.

What is in the cards for women representatives in the future? In chapter seven, Thomas lays out three possibilities. First, the overall picture for women legislators may be much like the mid-1980s experience of the Missoula Board, that is, there will be a greater percentage of women and a new political reality with new approaches to problem solving and an expanded range of issues to deal with. Second, women's more inclusive political agenda and distinctive ways of conducting business may restructure legislative operations so that both men and women will "equally embrace the values, structures and procedures of which women politicians now simply dream, female representatives will no longer be the prime movers of legislation regarding women, and children and the family."¹⁰ Thomas, however, predicts that a third result will most likely occur. Namely, the near future (ten to thirty years) will look much like it does at the

⁹ *Ibid.* at 110.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* at 152.

present time. Though the percentage of women legislators will continue to grow, these women will still have relatively little power, and will be largely unsuccessful in convincing their male counterparts to work for reform. In consequence, there will be change in terms of the scope of governmental agendas, but the process will remain much the same as it is now.

Although Thomas believes that the number of women legislators will continue to increase steadily with some growth spurts she predicts that it will take much more than women comprising 35 to 40 percent of legislatures for women to alter procedures. She also predicts that discrimination against women will continue in the immediate future and that it may well get worse before it gets better as male colleagues lose more and more to women's gains. Therefore, she concludes that there will be a slow steady progression toward the goals that women have collectively and individually set for themselves.

Thomas ends by offering a "cautionary word about tactics":¹¹ women will do well "to keep in mind the potential obstacles in their paths."¹² For example, while the impression of women as "outsiders" (thus, individuals with fresh ideas, more integrity, *etc.*) who have special expertise in domestic issues such as education, health and welfare probably helped women in the 1992 U.S. federal elections, women may not achieve this kind of success when conditions change. Jobs dealing with foreign policy issues especially still seem to be out of reach of women. It is still unclear whether the better strategy for women legislators is to emphasize their similarities to men or their differences. The answer to this dilemma, Thomas concludes, is for the public to focus on individual women's "strengths and weaknesses and their evolving proclivities [then women] will be true equals in the political world."¹³

Thomas' book has several strengths. Her style is extremely clear and readable, she makes good use of headings, recaps her points regularly, and carefully guides her reader through her well organized structure. Her research is thorough and her reconstruction of the gender politics literature that she relies on is useful. She contextualizes women officeholders' impact and situates her conclusions by recounting the history of women in politics. As well, she describes the history of procedural reform of American legislative institutions and the long history of work which finally culminated in women's suffrage in the U.S.

More importantly, her analysis is deep and acute. For example, her typology of expectations and uncovered reasons for the diversity of underlying assumptions in gender politics literature is astute. In her study, she makes some very intriguing and preceptive comments and poses some challenging questions. For example, before she offers an evaluation of the impact and significance of women legislators she discusses different standards of measurement that are possible. Thomas points out, it sounds basic, but "creating a set of standards and systematically evaluating accomplishments

¹¹ *Ibid.* at 156.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.* at 158.

based on each of its elements is something routinely overlooked in the gender politics literature."¹⁴ She deals with an interesting question in chapter five where she examines whether women tend to get coopted the longer they are in office or once they hold leadership positions. In places, Thomas' work is heartening for women; for example, she concludes that while women representatives during the 1970s tended to avoid discrimination, the women who took part in her 1980s study overcame discrimination in large part. Concluding, she offers some helpful advice to women legislators that as they work toward the goal of further reform they would do well to be mindful of the potential obstacles in their path. She advises women to understand the political winds that led to the election of so many of them in 1992 (lest they should be caught off guard when the political winds change and foreign policy once again becomes a prime issue of national concern).

But there are some weaknesses worth mentioning. It is unfortunate that her sources are not wider. For example, her examination of women representatives in the 1980s relies primarily on mail surveys to officeholders in twelve states and face to face interviews in six of those states. Although the states she chose are diverse, she acknowledges that she would have liked a wider sample had her resources so permitted. In consequence, her sample is regrettably small. Also, the response rate for her mail-in surveys was rather low (54 percent). In some parts of her study, Thomas relies on scant evidence (again, for the most part, it seems to be so out of necessity). For example, in formulating predictions for the future, Thomas cites two instances where women have comprised 100 percent of boards: she cites the Missoula Montana County Board in 1985 and the Multnomah Oregon County Board of Supervisors in 1986. But in her discussion she cites evidence from the Missoula board exclusively.

Another weakness of Thomas' book is that her writing is extremely loose and seems to take a long time to get to significant points. For example, on page 91, Thomas undertakes to examine the connection between the proportion of women in legislatures and the pursuit of women's policy priorities. First, she poses some (good) questions, she describes the data she will be relying on, she develops two measurements of the dependent variable, she divides the states surveyed into three categories, she offers five sets of predictions, she divides her findings into four categories, then finally on page 94 she begins to reveal her findings. I think she would have done better to condense this process, possibly utilizing more graphs or putting some of this information in footnotes. At times Thomas' style can be tiring but I would credit her for careful research (for the most part) and great clarity; perhaps reader fatigue is the price to pay for those strengths. Another criticism: many of her conclusions seem patently obvious; chapter four examines the nature of and effects of support for women legislators. Thomas finds that women representatives "are more likely to develop distinctive policy priorities in high-proportion environments."¹⁵ I acknowledge that sometimes the obvious needs to be stated and proven so that the work that builds on such a base is secure, but sometimes Thomas' work seems a bit banal because of these self-evident conclusions.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* at 128.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* at 86.

My final criticism of Thomas' work is that throughout the book she sets up two extreme positions and examines their validity; then, invariably she takes a middle point of view between the two extremes. I think that she may well be correct to take such a position at every point but I wondered at points if Thomas was being a bit lazy in her analysis. At any rate, she explains: "[t]hroughout this book I have expressed distaste for discrete, reductionist categories in the analysis of political behaviour. Consistent with the proclivity, my predictions for the future reflect elements of several of these scenarios...."¹⁶ Altogether, this publication is interesting, insightful, and relevant for anyone with an attraction to gender politics and political science. In spite of its weaknesses I would recommend it highly and I hope it will be a model for further studies on women legislators in the U.S. and elsewhere.

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¹⁶ *Ibid.* at 153.