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## WOMEN TAKE THEIR PLACE IN LEGISLATURES

Bands of brothers create informal trust networks that shape governing institutions. The extent to which bands of sisters—or bands of brothers and sisters—also do the same, warrants close attention.

—GEORGIA DUERST-LAHTI, “Governing Institutions, Ideologies, and Gender”

On February 28, 2012, three-term senator Olympia Snowe (R) announced that she would retire from the U.S. Senate. She was dissatisfied with her work environment within Congress. Partisanship had made government unfriendly and ineffective. She vowed to find new ways to “best serve the people of Maine” (Steinhauer 2012). Senator Snowe did not leave the Senate without first trying to change it. She and her female colleagues had tried to avoid the pitfalls of heightened polarization by participating in women-only activities to foster camaraderie across the aisle and keep debate civil (Carlson 2012). Unlike Representatives Margaret Heckler (R-MA) and Elizabeth Holtzman (D-NY), who created the Congressional Caucus for Women’s Issues (CCWI) in 1977 to organize Congress’ response to women’s policy issues raised by second-wave activism and improve women representatives’ effectiveness, Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) created a Senate organization in the late 1980s, commonly referred to as the Supper Club, to better the quality of life for the legislators themselves (Carlson 2012). While Mikulski’s club was social in nature, observers have credited its participants with ending the 2013 government shutdown (Stolberg 2015a) and cosponsoring legislation at a higher rate than their male counterparts or women in the U.S. House (Stolberg 2015b). Bipartisan policy is sometimes a by-product, though not the objective,

of this group. Similarly, the CCWI's commitment to bipartisan policy achievement has ebbed and flowed over time.

Women legislators are strategic actors making decisions about their legislative strategy in specific political contexts. The CCWI and Supper Club each emerged in distinct political and institutional contexts within Congress and produced groups with different goals and activities. The CCWI is a congressional member organization registered with the House Administration Committee with officially recognized bipartisan leaders, while the Supper Club is an informal gathering over dinner, sometimes in the senators' own homes (Carlson 2012; Women's Policy 2016). Women legislators founded the CCWI during the second wave of the women's movement in the United States in order to address women's issues they felt party and committee leaders had previously ignored as well as to increase their own influence and effectiveness.<sup>1</sup> They were responding to a political environment that was ripe for attention to particular constituents' needs. They faced unique challenges in the House and the gender dynamics therein.<sup>2</sup> Women created the senators' Supper Club, on the other hand, during a different political climate for women with different needs. Their primary goal was not to address women's issues but rather to improve their own working environment, "to restore some of the natural camaraderie" (Carlson 2012).

This book traces the development of women's state legislative caucuses and the influence that both gender and party have on women's ability to organize collectively. An increase in partisanship at the federal and state levels has raised questions about whether American democracy is at serious risk. The polarization of political parties has stymied Congress's work and made "compromise" among our deliberative bodies a dirty word. Scholars and pundits alike often cite women legislators as an exception to the partisan rule, with their male colleagues corroborating women's claims of collegiality and bottom-line practicality. Women's caucuses at the state and federal level are evidence of such bipartisanship, but sweeping generalizations about women's political noblesse or high expectations of these organizations to represent all women would be misplaced within institutions traditionally organized around political parties.

Using over 180 interviews with state legislators and their staff, I map the location and types of women's caucuses across the United States. State-level variables such as party control, proportion of women in the legislature, and professionalism do not adequately explain why women organize where they do. Case studies provide the best vehicle for exploring the motivations of caucus creators and participants. Similarly, I use data from my interviews to understand why women created the types of organizations they did across the states and why women in some states do not organize around their gender at all.

Women create organizations on the basis of a shared gender identity in order to achieve both personal and collective goals. They do this within legislatures that mask the effects of gender while incentivizing political party affinity over any other identity.<sup>3</sup> Understanding how and why women form state legislative caucuses offers insights into broad questions regarding gendered institutions, collective action, and political party governance. The norms of legislatures disadvantage women through practice and policy, simultaneously acting as catalyst and deterrent for the creation of women's caucuses. By considering these groups within an institutional context, I examine party reactions to legislators who attempt to identify around a characteristic other than party and document what strategies women choose in which contexts. I also uncover the challenges they face as they represent their constituents and develop professionally as individuals.

Women's caucuses are examples of collective action *within* institutions. As such, I argue that the components of collective action (opportunities, resources, and frames) available to legislators organizing women's caucuses are contingent on the legislative environment, and are often gendered. With women's caucuses at the center of the analysis and by employing a feminist institutional frame—which analyzes formal and informal processes that reflect, structure, and reinforce gendered patterns of power within institutions—I expand the current conception of organizing in legislatures and reveal previously perceived neutral processes as gendered (Kenny 2007).

Through case studies that examine four attempts—two successful and two unsuccessful—to create women's legislative caucuses in New Jersey, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Iowa, I uncover the strategies that

women legislators employ to both thrive within male-dominated legislatures and harness their collective power to influence the institution and its policies. I find that savvy entrepreneurs, specific institutional features such as Democratic Party control, existence of other caucuses, and low levels of partisanship facilitate successful women's organizing. These findings indicate that party and gender intersect to facilitate and constrain legislators' pursuit of political power and influence.

Within this investigation, I asked four central questions: (1) What are the specific opportunities, resources, and frames that women legislators use to create women's caucuses? (2) How and why do some women legislators choose a policy mission for their caucus rather than limiting their focus to a social network for members? (3) How do women legislators overcome the challenges to their collective identification as women within male-dominated and partisan institutions? (4) Why do some attempts at creating women's caucuses fail while others succeed?

As the first comprehensive analysis of women's caucus attempts in state legislatures, my work gives voice to women's experience within state legislatures. This book illuminates the daily interactions among officeholders that create and reinforce gender norms that limit all legislators' ability to serve their constituencies effectively. It is a comprehensive study of how political parties and gender shape legislative behavior, including women's organizing and men's reactions to it, and I offer remedies to the more negative aspects of increasing partisanship. Finally, my analysis can serve women legislators who are considering creating a caucus by offering them a list of potential assets to consider and obstacles to circumvent as they organize.

## WOMEN'S CAUCUSES AS WOMEN'S POLITICAL HISTORY

The first women to serve as state legislators were three Republicans elected to the Colorado House of Representatives in 1894. Since then, thousands of women have served in state senates and houses in all fifty states. Their proportions in 2017 varied between a high of 40 percent in Arizona and Vermont to a low of 11.1 percent in Wyoming (CAWP 2017b). Questions about these women reflect the cultural expectations of gender norms and traditional inquiries of political science. While

some studies ask, “Do women matter?” (Berkman and O’Connor 1993; Bratton 2002; Saint-Germain 1989; Swers 1998; Welch 1985), others ask, “When and how do they matter?” (Beckwith 2007; Holman 2014; Osborn 2002; Poggione 2004; Reingold 1996; C. Rosenthal 2000; Stanley and Blair 1991; Thomas 1991). As our understanding of gender as a concept has evolved, scholars have begun to ask how gender as a constitutive process, shaping our views of what it means to be a man or a woman, affects those who enter public office (Hawkesworth 2003; Kenney 1996; Sanbonmatsu 2006).<sup>4</sup> My analysis of women’s attempts at collective action within legislatures exposes this process and illustrates the gendered nature of political parties and state legislatures.

Twenty-two women’s caucuses existed at the state legislative level in the United States as of 2016. In my research, I have found them in every region of the country, in Republican-controlled and Democrat-controlled legislatures. They are present in states with average proportions of women legislators as well as in those at the high and low poles of the scale. They are found all over the map, with several in conservative southern states. Some caucuses are very formal with bylaws, officers, and dues, while others are less so. Most notably, their objectives vary, with some formulating policy agendas, others taking issues as they come, and others with no policy focus at all. Caucus activities are varied as well, with many taking part in distributing scholarships, hosting campaign trainings, or sponsoring events to commemorate women’s contributions to their states’ political history. The diversity of women’s caucuses is reflective of their diverse political contexts. Women tailor their organizations to meet their states’ specific needs and in response to the gender and partisan norms of their political environments. Those norms necessitate different priorities from other types of legislative caucuses, with a majority of women’s caucuses declining to set legislative agendas. Their decisions to forgo policy in pursuit of other goals reflect that women’s experiences within legislatures are distinct due to their gender, necessitating unique organizations. A cohort of legislators from rural or coastal areas of the state (who often form caucuses) does not have needs beyond policy in the way women legislators do. My analysis of caucus formation clarifies the legislative behavior of men and women and the elasticity of partisan and gender norms within political institutions.

Representative Julia McClune Emery of Connecticut founded the first known women's caucus, the Order of Women Legislators (OWL), in 1927. She would go on to form the National Order of Women Legislators (NOWL) in 1938 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt received over thirty women legislators for tea in Washington, D.C. The purpose of this national nonpartisan organization was to "promot[e] a spirit of helpfulness" among women members of state legislatures, acting as a "'clearing house for information,' and promoting the election of competent women to public office" (National Order of Women Legislators Records). These early pioneers set priorities that many women's caucuses still share today; the gendered nature of legislatures persists as women often remain marginalized from traditional information channels and elective office.

The Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) began monitoring women's presence in public office in 1971. A year later, Senator Rosalie Abrams (D), Delegate Pauline Menes (D), and others formed the Women Legislators of Maryland, the oldest sustaining women's caucus, following the NOWL model, after abhorrent treatment by their male colleagues. Georgia Sorenson highlights the last straw as perceived by the women legislators of the day:

The increasing presence of women in the Maryland legislature had begun to create some stresses and pressures. While their numbers and tenure had increased, women had been entirely shut out of key positions in both the Senate and the House. Delegate Pauline Menes pointed out this lack of representation when she criticized her party's leadership for its failure to appoint any women to the key standing committees in the House of Delegates. The Speaker of the House, Thomas Hunter Lowe, responded by appointing Delegate Menes "Chairman of the Ladies' Rest Room Committee." Delegate Menes recognized, however, that this obvious slight could be put to her advantage. She interpreted her appointment as committee chair as grounds for her attendance at the weekly leadership meetings held by the Speaker and President of the Senate. She was refused admittance because her presence would "make the men feel uncomfortable" and since there was "really no reason for the Chairman of the

Ladies' Rest Room Committee to attend anyway.” (Sorenson 2000)

The WLM was formed in direct reaction to bias against women inside the institution. This excerpt highlights women's increased presence in the legislature, their exclusion from leadership and information flows, and male condescension as contributing to the development of a women's organization. In addition to their dissatisfaction with the status of women inside the institution and the lack of attention paid to issues they felt were of vital importance, the establishment of the black caucus in 1971 was also cited by the legislators as inspiration. It signaled to Menes and others that organizing around identity was legitimate.

The Massachusetts Caucus of Women Legislators (MCWL) was created in 1975 to pass the state's equal rights amendment. Legislators organized around this issue, and the state constitution was amended in 1976 to change the existing language of “all men are born free and equal” to “all people” are so created (Sainsbury-Wong, Wilson, and Vangeli 2011). In Massachusetts today, caucus leadership is decided alphabetically with leaders serving two years and the position moving to the next name alphabetically, regardless of seniority, with one chair from the House and one from the Senate. The caucus has several subcommittees that host informational meetings on issues, but there is no consensus agenda created at the beginning of the session. It has staff, creates a quarterly newsletter, and its members pay dues. The stated mission of the MCWL has been “to enhance the economic status and equality of women and to encourage and foster women in all levels of government” (MCWL 2018). This caucus was created to address women's issues within the legislature and continues to do so today without a formal agenda.

These caucus creation stories share elements with the cases I examine here. Bias against women was a useful frame in the case of Maryland in 1972 and in New Jersey in 2009.<sup>5</sup> While both caucuses in the 1970s were formed to be policy oriented, the caucuses of today find challenges associated with this purpose. Some organizers choose to postpone that goal in order to get a group off the ground, as in Colorado, while others push forward sometimes with success, as in New Jersey (however short-lived). Still others are not able to establish

a group with policy as a goal as in Pennsylvania. In Iowa, even when the purpose was left up to the participants, leaving open the possibility for a social caucus only, one failed to materialize.

Partisanship has always been a challenge for women seeking to solidify their influence through bipartisan collective action. At a 1982 conference hosted by CAWP, women legislators from eighteen states convened to share best practices about caucus formation as well as other legislative and elective strategies. Carol Mueller (1984) reported that, among these conference attendees, women in fourteen states were actively meeting as a group, one state had already had a group that had faded out, and two additional states were in the early stages of organizing.

In Mueller's (1984) first accounting of women's caucuses, she quotes one Maine legislator as saying, "We're not a caucus-oriented state. We're a partisan state and we love our political parties" (160), juxtaposing women's caucuses and political parties. Within a partisan environment, women legislators must weigh the costs and benefits of bipartisan organizing. Boris Shor and Nolan McCarty (2011) find wide variation in polarization at the state legislative level. My analysis of bipartisan organizing across the fifty states contextualizes those findings and indicates potential deviations from the national trend of polarization.

## DEFINING WOMEN'S ORGANIZING IN LEGISLATURES

Before I can anticipate which factors influence caucus creation or how caucuses might engage the legislative process, I must first define my terms. Clarifying which behaviors count as caucusing has been important in previous scholarship because these conceptual decisions narrow or expand our understanding of women's organizing. For my purposes, I define a women's caucus as a bipartisan, institutionalized association of legislators that seeks to improve women's lives.

For my purposes, a *bipartisan* association is open to members of any political party. Norms of legislative behavior suggest that party leaders reward loyalty and conformity within legislatures (Francis 1985; Hedlund 1984; Kanthak 2009). Women legislators who draw attention to

their gender rather than their party by forming these groups are challenging the party system that traditionally governs the legislative process. I argue that organizations in which legislators prioritize gender over party are alternative mechanisms that challenge party control of legislative agendas and allegiances. In some rare cases, these caucuses may consist of legislators of only one party at some points in time. As long as the group is open to all, year-to-year membership may vary according to which women are in office at the time.

By *institutionalized*, I refer to a structure that enables the group to function and be recognized by other nonmembers as a group. While some organizations are very sophisticated with multiple leadership positions, formal bylaws, and regular meeting schedules, the minimum requirement for my criteria is an identifiable leader. A leader facilitates meetings and communicates information, which makes even the most basic activities of a group possible.

*Seeking to improve women's lives* is understood broadly, and includes efforts on behalf of women constituents through legislation or more informal mechanisms, as well as efforts to improve the lives of women legislators themselves. In setting this as a criterion, I am requiring that at least some of the activities of the group be focused on addressing issues of gender. It is common for women to create and be the majority of members of other caucuses, like Kids' Caucuses, for example, and while scholars should examine their proclivity toward these issues, this type of organization would not qualify as a women's caucus because the primary issue of concern is not women.

Because I allow for such broad purposes, I capture a variety of activities within my definition. Examples of legislation sought on behalf of women constituents might include women's health initiatives like funding for breast and cervical cancer screening (as in Hawaii). More informal examples include establishing a breastfeeding area in the capitol building (New York), or women legislators appearing as a group in the front row of the gallery to support victims of sexual violence who had experienced inappropriate questioning by male committee members during a formal hearing (Maryland). Some groups may hold legislative hearings, make bill endorsements, offer resolutions, or hold public events. Finally, efforts to improve the lives of women legislators could include advocating for more gender equity

in leadership positions and committee appointments (Massachusetts). Other possible purposes may be mentoring (other legislators or women at large), candidate recruitment/training, granting scholarships, or socializing that boosts morale.

To be clear, within my definition, the absence of a caucus does not mean that women in the state have no organizational ties. In many states, women have important relationships, sometimes as roommates or lunch mates. These social networks are important and play a role in how women work together within legislatures. Caucuses, however, are groups with some formality of structure and purpose, although these structures may be varied and their purposes broadly defined. I also acknowledge that individual women may work to improve the lives of women and be successful. I am studying here the examples in which women choose to join together consistently to undertake these activities. I do not include official recognition by the legislature as part of my criteria. States vary in whether or not formal filing for legislative organizations is necessary. Many legislatures have no process by which the institution can confer official recognition. Caucuses may be recognizable by legislators without official recognition by the institution and therefore I do not consider it a criterion.

My definition of a women's caucus is more expansive than that in previous scholarship on the subject. At the congressional level, caucuses are alternative organizing mechanisms to committees and parties that prove important for legislation (Hammond 1998). The National Conference of State Legislatures, which monitors women's organizing, goes a step further and defines a formal women's caucus as one that meets weekly or monthly during session, hires staff, is policy oriented, and/or pays dues. Informal caucuses are primarily social in nature, meet less regularly than formal caucuses, and do not necessarily have a legislative agenda (Oliver 2005). While Susan Hammond (1998) requires policy interest, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) differentiates between those caucuses that seek to influence policy and those that are primarily social. My research in state legislatures has uncovered variations even between these two categories, indicating that not all formally structured women's caucuses engage in policy work, while some with very informal structures may do so. Further, not all women's caucuses engage specifically in the creation of

public policy and none of them do it in the same ways. It is for these reasons that I have chosen to consider a broader range of purposes and structures in evaluating women's caucuses.

## WHY CAUCUSES MATTER FOR LEGISLATURES AND LEGISLATORS

Caucuses are significant aspects of legislative life that deserve closer study. Congressional caucuses are important tools for voicing public concerns in Congress (Hammond 1998). Similarly, state legislative caucuses are alternative organizing mechanisms important to state policy agendas. They provide a space for legislators to create policy priorities apart from those that committees and parties determine. Consequently, relationships and skills created by caucus participation assist members in pursuing public policies regardless of whether those policies are caucus priorities. This benefit indicates that identity-based caucuses may improve legislative function by equipping their members with useful political skills that can be applied broadly beyond those issues of concern to the specific constituents of an identity caucus.

It is important to understand the potential benefits caucuses bring to both individual legislators and the legislative institution as a whole. Caucuses allow legislators to express certain identities, thereby signifying themselves as experts in certain legislative areas and advocates for certain constituencies. They help fellow members build relationships and gain information useful for accomplishing their goals. Caucuses also provide opportunities for leadership. Depending on the proportion of women in the majority party, the presence of a women's caucus may correlate to higher proportions of women in leadership positions, thus increasing their status within the institution, getting them closer to the reins of power themselves (Kanthak and Krause 2012).

Identity caucuses also have an important symbolic power to signal governmental legitimacy to their constituents and amplify the voice of marginalized citizens. For example, states with influential black caucuses tend to have higher black voter turnout, indicating a relationship between caucus presence and political behavior (Clark 2010). Across the states, black caucuses have included both public policy and community engagement as priorities (Sullivan and Winburn 2011).

Because of the historical exclusion of marginalized groups from political institutions, their establishment of caucuses has not only policy but also efficacy implications for their constituents. Identity caucuses can also, however, act as gatekeepers and define insiders and outsiders in ways that complicate collaboration and unity (Lemi 2017). Who is allowed to participate in these groups defines not only the organization but also individual members of the legislature and influences the racing and gendering of institutions.<sup>6</sup>

Women's caucuses are a gendered opportunity structure within legislatures that potentially increases the ability of women to act on behalf of their constituents (Reingold and Schneider 2001). Social movement scholars characterize opportunity structures as those that cause political decision makers to alter their views of different groups such that shifting opinions allow for movement strategies to be successful. Gendered political opportunities would be those that shift elite opinions about the proper roles for women (McCammon et al. 2001). Women's caucuses are a signal of "women's institutional strength" (Tolbert and Steuarnagel 2001, 15) and can increase the number of women in leadership positions (Kanthak and Krause 2012). However, caucus participation also risks backlash from male colleagues and party leaders who hold positional and informal power. This book examines the context in which risk might be minimized for women legislators seeking to shift the gendered expectations of legislative institutions.

If the gendered or partisan nature of the legislature restricts women's ability to form such groups, women's ability to legislate and represent women may be constrained. As a constitutive process, gender operates within institutions in conjunction with other identity categories, such as race, to shape the legislative behavior available to members—legitimizing some political strategies (like caucusing) and eliminating others. Within my analysis, I investigate specifically the tension for women between their gender and party identities in the pursuit of their legislative goals by examining more closely women's relationship to each other and their political parties. State legislatures are following the national trend of heightened polarization, but this trend varies across the states (Shor and McCarty 2011). By examining the context

in which women's bipartisan caucuses emerge, we can better understand both the effects of party polarization on women legislators and women legislators' potential influence on the polarization of the legislature itself. My evaluation of women legislators' decisions to organize or not tells us about not only about women's legislative behavior but also the institutional norms, both formal and informal, that men and women alike enforce and enact.

Attention to institutions illustrates the benefits women's organizing may bring to legislatures. Because political party is so important within legislative life, it is crucial to understand how women legislators integrate party identity with the other identities that they bring with them to the legislature and that are constituted therein. Bipartisan women's caucuses offer a unique opportunity to analyze how individuals manage intersectional political identities within partisan and gendered institutions. This analysis can help explain not only women's legislative behavior but also the ways institutions perpetuate both partisan and gender norms throughout time and place. In examining the stability of congressional norms, Barbara Hinckley (1971) described institutions in this way:

Institutions, by definition, exist over time. They are human creations, existing through stable patterns of interaction among individuals and groups. Actions are defined, refined, and supported with the passage of time. They become regularized, routinized, stabilized. Expectations about who does what and who should do what are formed and influence subsequent actions, and so on. (7)

Hinckley's (1971) depiction explains how gendered norms are both enforced and perpetuated within legislatures, and can delay or discourage women from rocking the boat. At the same time, it offers hope that the creation of women's caucuses might disrupt those stable patterns and alter the inner workings of the institution.

Women's caucuses make three significant interventions to legislative institutions. First, by creating a legislative organization that signifies gender as politically salient, women legislators challenge the false

gender neutrality of politics, which, as Iris Young (2000) explains, distorts political reality and therefore outcomes:

Where some structural social groups have dominated political discussion and decision-making, these social perspectives have usually defined political priorities, the terms in which they have been discussed, and the account of social relations that frames the discussion. At the same time these perspectives are not experienced as only one way to look at issues, but rather often taken as neutral and universal. (144)

By centering women legislators' organizing behaviors, I make visible male dominance within these institutions that many consider androgynous. Observers may note this male advantage in the social norms of legislatures where men call out women for speaking in groups larger than pairs, where men exclude women from social gatherings where they actually make the deals, and through more formal processes where party leaders concentrate women legislators in less powerful committee appointments and exclude them from leadership positions. Examples of these practices are illustrated in the creation story of women's legislative caucuses and make legislatures legible as gendered institutions.

Second, the establishment of women's caucuses inside male-dominated legislative institutions can provide a safe space for marginalized legislators to support each other, as well as help develop and refine legislative initiatives. Many legislators' descriptions of caucuses mirror S. Laurel Weldon's (2004) subaltern public spheres "where marginalized groups are better able to organize and express themselves more freely" (5). Caucuses are a way to counteract institutional norms that may require women to play a man's game, adopt a particular political persona, or adhere to someone else's definition of appropriate political priorities. Under certain conditions, women's caucuses may be the site of transformation within institutions described by Mary Fainsod Katzenstein (1998) as "protected spaces or habitats where activists can meet, share experiences, receive affirmation, and strategize for change" (35).

Finally, as one type of organization within what Weldon (2004) calls the feminist civil society, women's caucuses may contribute to

making “democratic policymaking processes more inclusive of women’s voices and reflective of their perspectives by providing a forum for them into the broader public sphere. . . . [T]he development of feminist civil society greatly enriches feminist and democratic politics and should improve state responsiveness to women’s concerns” (2). As conduits for advocacy organizations into the legislature, women’s caucuses may contribute to better representation for many different constituencies. These potential interventions are significant and indicate the importance of these organizations beyond the adoption (or not) of women-friendly policy. By defining caucuses as policy-seeking only, we limit our ability to account for organizations’ larger effect on institutions.

## ANALYZING WOMEN’S ORGANIZING IN U.S. STATE LEGISLATURES

I seek to explain and ameliorate the marginalization of women within and by legislatures through feminist institutionalism, analyzing formal and informal processes that reflect, structure, and reinforce gendered patterns of power within institutions (Kenney 1996; Kenny 2007; Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010). To do so, it is necessary to observe and document the processes by which this marginalization occurs and the potential opportunities for equalizing the gender power balance for more inclusive participation and more fair representation by and for women. Women not only are acted on within gendered legislatures, they also can play a role in the restructuring of those institutions and legislative behaviors by accentuating or downplaying their feminine identity. By caucusing around their gender, women are gendering the practices and norms of the legislature (Krook and Mackay 2011; Lovenduski 1998). This book investigates specifically those institutional aspects that facilitate or constrain women’s creation of legislative caucuses, moving us toward a better understanding of the different ways women legislators practice gender in various local contexts.

Understanding how the strategic employment of gender happens in different institutional contexts is useful to political science because it can shed light on the importance of context in the outcomes of legislatures. Beyond the formal organization of legislatures, informal

rules invoke systems that serve to produce and reproduce gender inequality. Women's caucuses may be one way to subvert this inequality, as Georgia Duerst-Lahti (2002) explains, "Based upon trust, loyalty, unspoken rules, and reciprocity, informal associations and processes often circumvent, even supersede, processes and practices of the formal organization" (382).

While all state legislatures are gendered institutions, I do not find that gender affinity is a tool that women legislators universally invoke or uniformly implement. Nor do I find that it is guaranteed to work in the same ways across different environments.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, understanding how and why women employ gender in their own legislative behaviors demonstrates the multiplicity of "women's interests" and enriches our understanding of women's representation.

To accomplish these goals, I conducted cases studies of all women legislators' attempts at caucus creation made between 2006 and 2010. During this time frame, four attempts occurred in New Jersey, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Iowa. My case studies test hypotheses about women's caucus creation, employing personal interviews and analysis of media coverage when available. Case studies are the best way to determine the reasons why caucuses emerge in some environments and not in others because this investigation can take into account various contextual factors that contribute to or prohibit the development of a caucus. By taking a step beyond identifying and categorizing women's caucuses, I am able to hear in women's own words why they made the decisions they did, what obstacles they perceived and the strategies they chose to face them, and to what they attribute their success and failure. I also document the enforcement of gender and political party norms by women and men legislators in reaction to women's organizing, recognizing that gender is not something only women do or inhabit.

Identifying where women form caucuses and when they are successful is important for understanding when and where women identify collective action as a useful strategy for representation. Similarly, identifying those contexts in which collective action has been unsuccessful and detrimental to women's representation is also necessary to appreciate the quality of women's representation across the states. Social movement theorists consider political opportunity, mobilizing

structures, and frames to be explanatory of collective action outside of institutions (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). Evidence within the literature suggests that women legislators share many things that motivate them to act collectively and mobilize *within* legislatures. Generally, findings suggest that women share common issue interests, more moderate or liberal positions on existing policies, and legislate differently than their male counterparts (CAWP 2001; Dodson 1991; Thomas 1991; Thomas and Welch 1990). For example, CAWP (2001) reports that “within both parties, women are more likely than men to support more liberal or moderate positions on a variety of issues, including abortion, hate crimes, civil unions for gays and lesbians, and racial preferences in job hiring and school admissions” (8).

Studies regarding women’s legislative style also indicate that organizing caucuses may be an extension of their approaches to work. Women demonstrate more inclusive behaviors, spend more time on constituent service, collaborate with others more, and are perceived by other legislators as opening up the political process by bringing in historically underserved groups and making political processes more public (CAWP 2001; Epstein and Powell 2005; C. Rosenthal 1997). On the basis of these commonalities, caucusing may be an extension of these legislative behaviors.

The fact that women’s caucuses exist in some states but not in others may not be a function of opportunities, resources, and frames only. These factors’ “effects are interactive” (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, 8) and, as Lee Ann Banaszak (1996) explains, interpretation of these three factors by actors may explain different results for the same phenomena. Caucuses may be unevenly distributed across the fifty states because women legislators have different perceptions of the political landscape of their legislature, their own gendered identity, and the political consequences of their gendered identity. While some women legislators may not wish to organize, others who do may perceive the political opportunities, resources, and frames available to them differently, explaining the variation in the success and failure of women’s caucuses across states.

By examining the creation of women’s caucuses we can better understand the partisan and gendered nature of state legislatures. I find that political party shapes the options and strategies available to women

legislators. Previous work on women's substantive representation has found that Democratic and Republican women do not always share public policy priorities or positions, and my study corroborates that their decisions about how to legislate is also influenced by their party identification (Osborn 2012). This project also analyzes how men react to women's presence in the legislature and the role they think gender should play in politics. While women are still tokens in many state legislatures with their difference magnified, men's gender identity is rendered invisible, masking their disproportionate representation in the body in general and within leadership positions specifically.<sup>8</sup>

My analysis demonstrates the gendered nature of partisanship. Building on previous scholarship (Freeman 1986; Osborn 2012), this study documents the navigating women legislators do in order to balance their partisan and gendered identities within legislatures. Legislatures have established party as the premier political identity; however, many women legislators think gender is also important. Their experiences in the world and the legislature are heavily determined by their identity as women, which often relegates them to particular committees and excludes them from leadership positions. To leverage this identity, some women have sought to create gender specific spaces within legislatures. Often this is a consequence of the bias they experience, within not only the legislature but also their respective parties (for example, in New Jersey).

Gender plays an important role in legislative behavior, influencing the decisions legislators make and the judgments they make about their colleagues' behavior. A bipartisan organization that validates gender as a significant political identity disrupts the prioritization of political party within legislatures. I find that women's caucuses call attention to women's political contributions indirectly or directly (as in Colorado) making visible the androcentrism of the legislature and political party ideologies that pigeonhole women's interests as "special" interests. Caucuses also, however, reify women's difference, often with members reverting to the language of difference to justify their existence and narrow priorities. Women legislators draw stark comparisons between their own work ethic and that of their male colleagues who do not share the second shift as primary caregivers at home and who do not have to work as hard within the legislature to see results.

While women legislators create women's caucuses, they do so in reaction to or in conversation with men's behaviors and decision making. It was New Jersey's male partisans who ignored and discouraged women politically, enabling Senator Loretta Weinberg (D) to exploit their actions as a frame for organizing. It was male dominance of the agenda that motivated Representative Karen Middleton (D) in Colorado to rally women together. In Pennsylvania, however, it was women who scuttled the attempt at a caucus because it was women, feeling slighted by a newcomer and harboring bitter partisan resentments, who sabotaged the attempt there. The Democratic Party leadership, at least officially, supported efforts to organize subgroups, which inspired Representative Vanessa Lowery Brown, even though the informal rules enforced by men and women within that institution won out. In Iowa, party leaders on both sides, Democrat and Republican, have long discouraged the creation of alternative groups and even a very senior woman entrepreneur could not overcome her status as an outsider to get things off the ground. Again, informal rules were violated—not any formal ones.

If we are to understand how women represent women (or anyone else, for that matter) within legislatures, we must better understand the role women's caucuses play, why they take different forms across the states, and why some women do not organize around their gender identity at all. Identifying where and why women organize in legislatures can determine if such groups contribute to improved quality of life for women both inside and outside the institution.

## OVERVIEW

Chapter 2 establishes the theoretical framework for the project, explaining gender as a process and behavior that legislators act out. I argue that the existing conceptions of caucuses are problematic for women who, due to gendered and partisan legislative norms, often create caucuses without an explicit policy focus or formal structure. In order to placate party leadership or convince tepid participants that the caucus is "safe," women legislators often prioritize networking among women, cataloguing women's history, or promoting other women (through scholarships, mentoring, and so on) as acceptable motivations to organize. By recon-

ceptualizing and broadening what counts as a women's caucus, I offer a more accurate accounting of these groups across the country and suggest that policy impact may come from unexpected places. In particular, I demonstrate how partisan identification and gender identification present potential caucus entrepreneurs with a web of challenges that must be negotiated in order to successfully organize.

In Chapter 3, I report findings that reveal a number of types of women's caucuses previously unaccounted for across the fifty states. I present legislators' explanations of why they created the particular type of caucus within their state and offer evidence of why women in some states do not caucus. This diversity validates my claim that women's organizing is contextual, and demonstrates the dynamic nature of gender as practiced in state legislatures with varying levels partisanship. Descriptive statistics paint only a partial picture and miss the important dynamics of these factors as determinative of caucus creation. This discrepancy establishes a need for the four case studies.

In Chapter 4, I examine the New Jersey case and document the ups and downs of caucus creation, telling the story of seasoned entrepreneurs taking advantage of a political opportunity only to be thwarted by partisanship. While an influx of new women elected to office provided the impetus for senior women legislators to organize a caucus, party loyalty divided them later, threatening the survival of the group and illustrating the role political party plays in constraining women's collective action.

Chapter 5 consists of the Colorado case, where a motivated entrepreneur sought to take advantage of the large number of women in office by founding a women's caucus. With her eye on the long game, she and her fellow early adopters compromised their own expectations for policy impact by establishing a social caucus, which would have bipartisan participation and possibly outlive their New Jersey counterpart's endeavor. A savvy entrepreneur and the continuity provided by staff enabled the Colorado women legislators to avoid the pitfalls of partisanship, which nevertheless constrained the options available to them for legitimate caucus objectives.

In Chapter 6, I analyze the Pennsylvania case, in which a political novice in an unfriendly environment failed to launch a caucus. Her fellow women legislators did not perceive a women's caucus as

important to them or their constituents. Senior women legislators in a highly polarized legislature sabotaged the caucus attempt due to both mistrust of women across the aisle and a desire to maintain their own status within the institution, demonstrating again the role political parties and institutional norms play in constraining women's organizing.

Chapter 7 focuses on Iowa, where, despite a history of women's caucuses in the state, an experienced former legislator lending her support, and the support of the Commission for the Status of Women, the legislators did not successfully launch a women's caucus. Even with external support, the women inside the institution, lacking any strong gender consciousness and facing the discouragement of party leaders, chose not to resurrect an all-women group.

In Chapter 8, I review where women's caucuses have emerged since 2010 and indicate that they adhere to the expectations laid out here. Finally, this chapter offers a discussion on the usefulness of caucuses for both the representatives and the represented. I conclude that because these groups can benefit both women legislators and their constituents, it is crucial that we appreciate their emergence within partisan and gendered institutions, acknowledging that they may defy our previous conception of legislative caucuses.