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## Vive la Différence?: Is There a Gender Gap in Campaign Strategy and Spending, and Does It Matter?

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# Vive la Différence?: Is There a Gender Gap in Campaign Strategy and Spending, and Does It Matter?

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## Abstract

Record numbers of women were elected into office in the U.S. in recent years, and campaign financing may have contributed to their successes. This raises two questions: Is there a gender gap in campaign strategy and spending? And if there is, does it have an impact on election outcomes? Using a new dataset that includes itemized campaign expenditures for the almost 3,500 candidates who contested a House election between 2012 and 2020, we report little evidence of a gender gap in candidates' campaign spending, but we find some differences in the effects of communications spending on women's and men's electoral performances. Female challengers, in particular, must spend more to achieve the same results as men. The findings provide yet another indicator that congressional elections provide an uneven playing field, and women must work harder than men to get elected. The results have implications for elections, representation, and public policy.

**Keywords:** gender, elections, campaign spending, campaign communications, Congress

**Wordcount:** 6,326

Women have made substantial strides in congressional elections in recent decades. Prior to 1992, fewer than 30 women had won a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in an election cycle. That year, sometimes referred to as the "Year of the Woman," paved the way for 47 women to be sworn into the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, a 70% increase over its predecessor. Women continued to make steady gains in House and other elections through the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Following the 2018 midterm elections, women claimed a record 101 House seats, and added another 18 in 2020. All things equal, women and men are equally likely to get elected to the House (e.g., Burrell 2014).

Some explanations for women's advances in electoral politics highlight the importance of societal transformations. More women occupy positions that are stepping stones to Congress. Women make up a majority of the national electorate, and groups such as EMILY's List have successfully recruited, trained, and supported record numbers of women candidate and activists. The political parties' congressional campaign committees and many access-oriented interest groups now incorporate gender into broader considerations of electability when targeting candidates. Female candidates are positioned to capitalize on workplace equality, sexual harassment, and many other issues that top the political agenda, particularly in election cycles where voters demand change.

Practical politics also may contribute to female candidates' recent successes, including campaign strategy and spending. Do women candidates budget precious campaign dollars the same as or differently from men? Do expenditures on different aspects of campaigning have the same effects on the electoral performance of these candidates? We address these questions using a new dataset comprising itemized campaign expenditures from the 2012 through 2020 House election cycles, attributes of the candidates who participated in these races, and variables that control for the context of each election. We find little evidence of a gender gap in campaign budgeting. However, there is some evidence that female challengers must spend more to perform as well as their male counterparts.

## Women's Candidacies and Campaigns

Despite the impressive increase in the number of women in Congress following the 2018 and 2020 elections, women still comprise only about 27% of all House members. Overall, women and men who run appear to have similar success rates in primary and general elections. But these similarities may mask significant differences in their candidacies and campaigns (Pearson and McGhee 2013). One major reason for women's underrepresentation in office is that women are less likely to run for office than are men (Fox and Lawless 2014; Lawless and Fox 2005); they comprised less than one quarter of all major-party House candidates in 2018 and 2020. Women are less likely to run due to self-perceptions they are less qualified (Fox and Lawless 2004), lower levels of self-confidence in their ability to win (Wolak 2020), greater concerns about fundraising (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013; Jenkins 2007), and party leaders' and other gatekeepers' limited efforts to recruitment them (Crowder-Meyer 2013; Lawless and Fox 2010; Sidorsky 2019).

Voter stereotypes are additional obstacles to women's candidacies, including perceptions that female candidates are less assertive, experienced, and knowledgeable (Baer 2018; Bauer 2015, 2017; Dolan 2010; Eagly and Karau 2002; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Lawless 2004). Candidate gender has a particularly strong effect on candidate evaluations early in the election season, when potential candidates have just begun to introduce themselves to voters (Andersen and Ditonto 2020). Political campaigns and media coverage can activate voter stereotypes (Bauer 2015; Cassese and Holman 2018; Dunaway et al. 2013), leading voters to seek more information about female candidates' competence and experience (Ditonto, Hamilton, and Redlawsk 2014). Many female candidates respond to gender stereotypes by emphasizing masculine traits and their competencies on the economy and foreign policy (Kahn 1996; Windett 2014), while downplaying household and family-related concerns (Stalsburg and Kleinberg 2015; but see Hayes and Lawless 2016 and Dolan and Lynch 2017). Female Democrats also target women voters with messages advocating abortion rights and other so-called women's issues (Herrnson, Lay, and Stokes 2003).

Although they have reached overall financial parity, women also must contend with some distinctive fundraising gaps. Women are underrepresented among sitting House members, who typically raise the most funds, and overrepresented among challengers, who usually raise the least and need to spend the most to compete (Jacobson 1978, 1990; Uhlman and Schlozman 1986; Herrick 1996; Francia 2001; Green 2003). The fundraising gender gaps among congressional challengers are particularly acute among the most qualified candidates (Pearson and McGhee 2013). Female challengers need to devote more effort to fundraising and use a broader array of techniques because they rely more on small personal contributions (Hogan 2007; Jenkins 2007; Crespino and Deitz 2010; Barber, Butler, and Preece 2016). Moreover, Republican women are particularly disadvantaged in fundraising (Kitchen and Swers 2016; Thomsen and Swers 2017; Bucchianeri 2018).

The persistent challenges female politicians confront result in women's campaigns differing from men's in a number of important ways. Women incumbents tend to face more competition (Palmer and Simon 2005) and require more resources. Women also make up a greater share of both challengers and open-seat candidates, and more women participate in competitive primaries than men (Lawless and Pearson 2008). Women nonincumbents typically have more political experience than their male counterparts (Milyo and Schosberg 2000; Anzia and Berry 2011; Pearson and McGhee 2013). Women have to devote more time to campaigning and overcome more obstacles to succeed (Miller 2015). Finally, Democratic women have benefitted from the assistance of EMILY's List, the National Organization for Women, and other women's groups (e.g., Day and Hadley 2005).

Differences in political careers, fundraising, issue stances, messages, bases of support, and voter perceptions provide a foundation for the expectation there is a gender gap in campaign strategies and spending practices. Nevertheless, there also are sound reasons to anticipate more similarities than differences between women's and men's campaigns. Research on House candidates shows both sets of candidates staff their campaigns similarly (Dabelko and Herrnson 1997), and few factors besides incumbency result in substantial differences in how candidates allocate their funds (e.g., Herrnson 2016). There also is substantial uniformity in how candidates allocate their resources across election cycles (Limbocker and You 2020).

Given the contrasting perspectives and findings regarding the impact of gender, it is important to take a close look at how women campaign. Budgetary decisions provide a great deal of information about a campaign, including whether it relies heavily on professional consultants, staff, or volunteers; uses polls, issue and opposition research, or other forms of information when formulating a strategy and message; or prioritizes mass targeting and communications techniques over individually targeted and personalized voter outreach. Campaign budgets also give insights into

candidates' expectations about the competitiveness of an upcoming election and the politicians' efforts to play a role on the national stage. These considerations inform the question: Is there a gender gap in how candidates budget their funds?

Perhaps a question of greater significance concerns the impact of budgetary decisions on election outcomes. Most studies find that campaign spending matters, particularly for challengers (e.g., Jacobson 1990). Herrnson (2016) and Schuster (2020) demonstrate spending on campaign communications, measured as spending on advertising and campaign events, can significantly affect voters' support for a candidate. What remains unclear is whether communications spending has the same impact on female and male candidates' electoral prospects.

There are additional reasons to revisit the debate over the impact of gender on campaign decision-making and spending on election outcomes. Women have campaigned more successfully in recent election cycles, resulting in record number of women lawmakers and enhanced female representation in Congress. It is unknown whether gender-based spending differences—or similarities—have contributed to women's recent gains.

### **Data and Methods**

We address the impact of gender on campaign budgeting, spending, and election outcomes using a new dataset that categorizes the \$5.2 billion in campaign expenditures made by major-party general election House candidates who ran between 2012 and 2020. The dataset was constructed using Federal Election Commission (FEC) data consisting of almost 4.9 million individual transactions. The FEC classifies candidate spending into twelve categories, but due to incomplete disclosure reports, the FEC codes only about 40% of all funds. Therefore, our first step was to code the FEC data into two sets of categories useful for studying campaigns. The first set consists of four broad groupings: campaign communications; research; overhead; and transfers to candidates, party committees, and allied groups. The second, and more granular coding, further divides the data into 18 categories. Campaign communications, for example, includes spending on TV ads, direct mail, digital outreach, and voter mobilization. Overhead includes staff salaries, fundraising, rent, and other administrative expenses. We coded the data by first using regular expressions (flexible text searches) to extract categories using memo texts for each transaction that include the disbursement vendor (see the Online Supplemental Information for details). In cases where regular expressions placed a transaction in more than one category, we manually coded it after consulting vendor websites and other public information. This approach enabled us to code 95% of the dollars the candidates spent. The remaining 5% consist of small expenditures unlikely to affect campaign conduct or election outcomes.

Next, we aggregated the itemized records to create a dataset that has one observation for each candidate in each election cycle in which the candidate contested a House race. The unit of analysis is the candidate-election cycle. Each observation records the total dollars and the proportion of total funds a candidate allocated to each category of campaign expenditure and corresponding information for the candidate's opponent.

Finally, we added information describing each candidate's gender, incumbency status, prior political experience, and other background characteristics; similar variables for the candidate's opponent; statistics recording the congressional district's partisanship, demographic composition, media markets, history of support for female candidates, and other information regarding voters' proclivity to support women politicians; and the outcome of the election. The resulting dataset consists of 3,471 candidate-election cycle observations. It is well suited to assessing the impact of gender on campaign budgeting and spending, and determining whether these factors have disparate effects on the fortunes of House candidates.

The first section of the analysis presents an overview of the data, including preliminary observations about women's and men's campaign expenditures. The second section uses multivariate models to estimate the impact of gender on how candidates budget their campaign funds; the dependent variables are the percentages of funds candidates allocate to each aspect of campaigning. The third section models the impact of different expenditures on the percentage of the votes a candidate receives. The primary independent variable is whether a candidate is a woman or a man; the gender of the candidate's opponent also is of interest.

The models control for a number of candidate and campaign characteristics. *Democrat* is coded 1 (and Republican 0). *Candidate spending* is the natural log of candidate expenditures.<sup>1</sup> For incumbents we control for *Length of tenure* (the number of terms served in the House), *Chamber leader* (coded 1 if the incumbent is the Speaker, majority or minority leader, or majority or minority whip), and the challenger's political experience. These variables could potentially affect how incumbents budget their funds and the impact of their campaign expenditures on their votes. For challengers, we control for the candidate's political experience. *Prior office holding experience* is coded 1 for candidates who previously held or currently hold elected office. Candidates with significant *Non-office holding political experience* are coded 1 for those who previously served as political appointees, party chairs, political aides, or previously ran for Congress. Many of these candidates share the political contacts, knowledge, and skills that advantage candidates with prior office holding experience, but they lack the visibility and fundraising advantages of office holders. Political amateur is the comparison category. For challengers, we also control for the length of tenure of the incumbent they sought to defeat, and whether the incumbent holds a leadership position. The models for open-seat candidates control for both candidates' political experience.

The models also control for relevant contextual variables. *District partisan advantage*, based on the Cook Political Report's Partisan Voting Index, records how much the district's partisanship favors a candidate relative to the national mean for all candidates. High values indicate a district that favors the candidate's party at the presidential level, while low values indicate that it disadvantages the candidate's party. Similarly, *National partisan advantage* captures contemporary national political conditions. Operationalized using the *RealClearPolitics* average of the two-party share of the generic congressional polling average in an election cycle, larger values indicate a candidate's party is in a very favorable position leading up to the general election (e.g., Democrats in 2018) and low values indicate the opposite (e.g., Democrats in 2010). *Seat previously held by a woman* controls for a district's predisposition to support a female House candidate. (It is excluded from the models for incumbents because it would indicate support for the candidate herself.) The *Number of women candidates for statewide office*, coded as the number of female general election candidates for governor or U.S. Senate, is an additional measure of voters' inclinations to support female politicians.<sup>2</sup> We also control for the election cycle.

Incumbency has a major impact on campaign strategies and tactics, and it could interact with a host of candidate-centric and contextual factors. As a result, we subset the data by incumbency when analyzing campaign budgets and by both incumbency and gender when analyzing the impact of campaign spending on vote share. We analyze the data using ordinary least squares regression with standard errors clustered by candidate to address the inclusion of five election cycles, which results in multiple observations for many incumbents and some other candidates. For open-seat races, we cluster by district. Alternative model specifications, including models that control for a candidate's and an opponent's racial or ethnic background and district demographics, confirm the findings' robustness (see Online Supplementary Information Table S3). Other robustness checks include two-stage least squares models and substitute the percentage of funds a candidate budgets to different communications for dollars spent on them. They produce results that also are largely consistent with our main findings (see Online Supplementary Information Tables S7 and S8). We limit our analysis to major-party contested general elections. An analysis of the impact of gender on strategy and spending in primaries is the subject of another study.

## Findings

How do House candidates budget their scarce resources? Not surprisingly, they commit the largest portion of their funds to campaign communications, which most directly affect voters. Spending on television advertising accounts for 17% of the typical candidates' campaign budget, direct mail makes up another 7%, and voter mobilization—a labor intensive activity—2% (see Figure 1). The overall tally for campaign communications is 46%, and research accounts for 5%. Overhead comprises 40% of the typical candidate's budget, which serves as a reminder that campaigns have much in common with small businesses. Transfers to candidates, party committees, and other groups, made primarily incumbents, accounted for the remainder.

[Figure 1 about here]

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<sup>1</sup> Using the natural log addresses issues associated with skewed data and facilitates comparisons across models. The results are not substantively different from those based actual dollars.

<sup>2</sup> The number of women statewide candidates ranges from 1 to 3: 80% had 1, 18% had 2, and 2% had 3 (Minnesota in 2018 and California in 2010).

The preliminary findings suggest there are virtually no gender-based differences in how female and male candidates allocate their resources. This applies to the four broad spending categories (see Table 1) and the subcategories they encompass (see Supplementary Appendix Table S1). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the women typically spend 14% more dollars than the men. The results suggest campaign budgets and expenditures also vary by other candidate and district characteristics. Incumbents average about \$1.9 million in spending—8% more than open-seat candidates and almost 110% more than challengers. Incumbents budget the least on communications and the most on transfers, useful in securing (or maintaining) a congressional leadership post, building policy alliances with other legislators, and running for higher office (Heberlig and Larson 2012). For nonincumbents, political experience plays a significant role: communications accounts for about 60% of the spending of candidates with prior office holding experience or with significant non-elected experience. Amateurs, who have no significant political experience, commit fewer resources than other nonincumbents.

Competition has a big impact on overall campaign spending and budgeting. Candidates in toss-up races (as classified by the *Cook Political Report*) commit 70% of their funds to voter outreach, while candidates running for safe seats allocate a mere 41%. The latter group is mostly incumbents, who, as noted, generally occupy safe seats and are able to commit large sums to overhead and transfers. The results also suggest that budgeting strategies do not noticeably differ by party, though Republicans typically spend more money than Democrats. The high degree of convergence in campaign budgeting is likely a byproduct of the professionalization of elections and the shared expectations of candidates, campaign managers, consultants, and other political operatives (e.g., Herrnson 2016).

[Table 1 about here]

Does gender have an impact on campaign budgets when controlling for candidate characteristics and their electoral context? The results indicate only a few modest differences in the amounts female and male candidates allocate to each of the four broad budgeting categories, and these are conditioned by incumbency and party affiliation (see Figure 2 and Appendix Table A1). The predicted values in the figure demonstrate female Democratic challengers spend 50% of their budgets on communications, on average, while the average male Republican challenger allocates 56%. There also are modest differences among incumbents and open-seat candidates.

Besides incumbency, district partisanship and the national partisan advantage in a given year are consistently important (see Appendix Table A2). Incumbents allocate the most to overhead and transfers and the least to campaign communications and research. In short, candidate gender has at most a modest effect on both budgeting overall and budgeting on different types of communications. Most other candidate characteristics also have little systematic impact.<sup>3</sup> Challenger political experience is one exception, where experienced candidates spend less on overhead and more on communications. While not exactly cookie-cutter in uniformity, budgeting decisions are mainly influenced by incumbency and a few contextual variables.

[Figure 2 about here]

Gender appears to have very little substantive impact on campaign budgeting, but does overall spending on campaign communications have the same impact on the candidacies of women and men? Does spending on specific forms of communications matter? The answers to these questions have practical implications for women's campaigns. First, we assess the impact of a candidate's total communications spending. Next, we isolate the effects of expenditures on TV, direct mail, voter mobilization, and other outreach efforts. We omit spending on research and overhead because they account for relatively few dollars, and their effects, if any, register indirectly through campaign communications (e.g., Schuster 2020). Similarly, transfers to other candidates and organizations should have no effect on a candidate's vote share.<sup>4</sup> To avoid the complexities associated with interactions we estimate the effects of communications expenditures separately for women and men using split samples, as discussed above.

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<sup>3</sup> Recall, we also controlled for candidate and opponent race, and district characteristics, such as racial makeup, median income, and educational attainment, in other model specifications (see the Online Supplemental Information Table S4).

<sup>4</sup> Controls for these have no substantive effect on the findings (see the Online Supplemental Information Table S4).

At first glance, the results reveal a minor but statistically significant gender gap for the impact of total campaign communications on candidates' vote shares (see Appendix Table A5).<sup>5</sup> The coefficients as well as the predicted values suggest the amount a female challenger spends reaching out to voters has a smaller impact on the vote than the amount a male challenger spends (see Figure 3). To cross the crucial 50% vote share threshold, the typical female challenger has to spend about 18% above the \$1.2m average for women in her situation, while her male counterpart needs only increase his spending by 13% over the \$731k average for men. One potential explanation for this difference is some of the spending effects entwine with office holding or non-elected political experience, which improve the performance of men but not women. The results also underscore some established generalizations about elections: more women than men run in competitive districts; women spend more to become competitive; and campaign expenditures have diminishing returns. Indeed, between 2012 and 2020, 19% of female challengers ran in close races (categorized as a toss-up or leaning toward one party by the *Cook Political Report*) compared to 13% for their male counterparts. Competitive female challengers averaged nearly \$2.3 million in spending on campaign communications, compared to \$1.3 million for male challengers; female challengers in less closely contested elections also outspend their male counterparts.<sup>6</sup>

[Figure 3 about here]

Gender also has a more modest impact on open-seat contests. The typical female open-seat candidate spends more than her male counterpart (\$2.0 million to \$1.7 million, respectively), and a 10% increase in spending produces almost identical corresponding increases in vote share for both sets of candidates. Finally, the results show that most incumbents win by margins well in excess of 50% and incumbent spending has little effect on their vote shares, regardless of gender. The negative relationship between incumbent spending and electoral performance is consistent with previous studies that show incumbents spend more and win fewer votes when confronted by a strong well-funded challenger (Jacobson 1978, 1990).

Finally, Table 2 indicates that female candidates receive larger returns for expenditures on some types of communications and lesser returns on others. Among challengers, both men and women benefit from increased spending on television ads, but the women garner an estimated 2.1% increase in vote share for every 10% increase in TV expenditures, while the men's vote share increases by 3.8%. Women reap large benefits from increased expenditures on voter mobilization drives and men from newspaper ads and campaign events. Direct mail and literature yield similar benefits for both women and men. Neither set of candidates receives significant benefits from radio or digital advertising, both relatively low-budget items. The results for open-seat contests are dissimilar from those for challengers. Women accrue more votes from increased spending on TV, radio, and events; and men garner more votes from direct mail and voter mobilization. In contrast with the findings for challengers, the relationship between men's spending on newspaper and votes is negative. The results for itemized spending by incumbents also do not add much clarity. There is a large gendered difference for direct mail. The relationship between spending and vote shares for this and some other items is negative, as is consistent with the dynamics of incumbent spending.

Thus far, the results for itemized spending provide inconsistent results for the impact of gender across the different groups of candidates. We test the robustness of the findings by assessing the impact of changes in budgetary allocations on vote shares. It is possible the proportion of funds a campaign budgets for communications overall or specific types of outreach have different effects than actual dollars spent, in part, because of differences in the distributions of these variables. Budgetary allocations also more precisely measure campaign decision making because they are influenced less by candidate fundraising than are actual expenditures. However, the results for overall communications are similar to those for dollars spent, which is unsurprising given these variables are highly correlated.<sup>7</sup> The results for the impact of budget allocations to specific communications differ somewhat from those for actual expenditures (See Online Supplemental Information Tables S6 and S7). Nevertheless, individually and collectively the results do not provide systematic evidence of a gender gap in vote shares resulting from candidates' budgeting decisions.

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<sup>5</sup> One typical way to ascertain statistical significance of differences is by comparing the unstandardized betas using the following z-score formula:  $z = (B1_{men} - B2_{women}) / \sqrt{(SE_{B1}^2 + SE_{B2}^2)}$ . This was the method used here, which produced a z-score of 1.87, which indicates statistical significance at the 0.03 level.

<sup>6</sup> These figures are similarly imbalanced for races Cook categorizes as "Likely" to elect one party or the other, and are equal for "Safe" races. Outsized spending by female candidates also persists in open-seat races, though is less pronounced.

<sup>7</sup> The correlations for the percentage budgeted and the logged dollars spent on campaign communications are: .87 for female incumbents, .82 for male incumbents, .59 for female challengers, .50 for male challengers, .60 for female open-seat candidates, and .59 for male open-seat candidates.

[Table 2 about here]

## Conclusion

Although women's representation in Congress and other public offices remains well below that of men, female candidates have made significant strides in overcoming many of the obstacles that impede their election. Societal transformations account for some of this progress, as does the greater willingness of talented women to throw their hats into the ring. Female candidates' ability to attract financial support from individual donors, women's organizations, non-gendered interest groups, and political parties also has been important. The same is true of their strategic use of issues and messages to counter persistent gender biases among voters.

In light of these gains, we investigated the impact of gender on campaign spending strategies. Using an original dataset comprising the itemized expenditures of House candidates contesting elections between 2012 and 2020, we compared women's and men's campaign budgets and the effects of their spending decisions on their performance at the polls. Our results paint a picture of contemporary House campaigns characterized by large expenditures on TV and other communications and considerable outlays on overhead. They also demonstrate substantial uniformity between the campaigns of women and men; incumbency and political competition are the sources of most variation. We observed no major differences in the spending strategies of female and male candidates, even when controlling for other candidate characteristics, opponent qualities, and the electoral context. Overall, these results confirm the findings of other studies that indicate much uniformity in campaign budgeting (Herrnson 2016; Limbocker and You 2020).

The results also demonstrate that candidates' spending strategies are not the major contributing factors to election outcomes. Contextual variables, including district partisanship, inequalities in overall spending, and other advantages associated with incumbency are the primary determinants of most incumbent-challenger races. The amounts incumbents spend on communicating with voters overall, and on specific aspects of voter outreach, provide little in return. The findings for nonincumbents are inconsistent. Among challengers, women profit the most from expenditures on voter mobilization, while men reap greater benefits from television ads and campaign events. The findings for open-seat candidates, by contrast, indicate women receive the biggest payoffs from TV and events.

Although gender does not have a major impact on campaign budgeting, our results demonstrate that women and men get different returns for each dollar they spend to contact voters. Female challengers receive relatively smaller returns for their communications spending. They must spend a fair amount more than their male counterparts to win a majority of votes.

In addition to contributing to the debate over whether a gender gap exists in campaign strategies and the effects of campaign spending, the findings have implications for elections and women's representation. They demonstrate that the nuts-and-bolts of the campaigns waged by women and men are remarkably similar. These findings suggest that similarities in campaign spending strategies combine with women's unique issue positions and approaches to overcoming gender stereotypes to improve female candidates' electoral prospects. Nevertheless, the fact that female House challengers must raise and spend more money to achieve the same results as men is a reminder that elections rarely take place on an even playing field. Women still need to work harder to succeed, particularly when seeking to defeat an entrenched incumbent. As such, campaign finance remains an obstacle to women's political advancement and the enactment of laws concerning workplace equality, sexual harassment, abortion rights, healthcare, and other issues where women and men often hold different opinions. Money also remains an impediment to women achieving better representation in Congress



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