Sex and the City: Female Leaders and Spending on Social Welfare Programs in U.S. Municipalities

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Abstract: Scholars of urban politics have long argued that cities will shy away from extensive funding of social welfare programs, as fiscal realities make developmental policies far more attractive. Despite the arguments against municipal level funding of social welfare services, cities provide these programs. Why? One possible explanation is that local officials prefer funding welfare programs. The research presented here demonstrates that the gender composition of local elected bodies impacts the provision of welfare services. The presence of a female mayor has a large positive effect on the likelihood a city participates in funding welfare programs and the amount of monetary resources a city dedicates to these programs, particularly when combined with high levels of female representation on city councils.

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Introduction:

Scholars of fiscal federalism have long argued that the transient nature of wealthy urbanites require that city governments refrain from funding welfare or redistributional policies (Peterson 1981). In reality, local governments in the United States actually fund a wide variety of welfare programs, spending more than $456 million on welfare programs, $16 billion on housing and community development, and $30 billion on health and hospitals in 2007 (Census of Governments 2007). The puzzle presented here has been recently addressed by other authors, who have found that local welfare spending is driven by capital mobility and local political factors (Craw 2006; Craw 2010), as well as economic and institutional variables (Farmer 2010). Missing from these studies is an examination of the effect of who serves in local elected position on welfare spending. I show that the descriptive characteristics of representatives, particularly the gender of local politicians, effects whether local governments choose to fund welfare programs at all, and the amount of funding they dedicate to these programs. Specifically, I find that the presence of a female mayor has a positive effect on the propensity to engage in funding of welfare programs and on the amount of money that is dedicated to these programs.¹ Furthermore, I find that the percentage of women on a city council has no independent effect on either the propensity or amount of welfare funding, but does when interacted with the presence of a female mayors.

A substantial body of literature has examined the public policy effects of electing representatives from historically marginalized groups to public office, generally finding that female and minority representatives have the ability to influence policy outcomes. Looking at

¹ Throughout the paper, I use a broad definition of social welfare, including spending on welfare, health and hospitals, and community development, that is consistent with the extant scholarship, including Schneider (1989) and Craw (2006, 2010).
women in public office, the consensus in the scholarship is “descriptive representation by gender improves substantive outcomes for women in every polity for which we have a measure” (Mansbridge 2005, 622). Specific to issues of local welfare policies, scholars have found that the presence of women in office leads to increases in spending on policies relating to welfare, education, children and women (Besley and Case 2003; Kenny and Lott 1999; Rehavi 2007). Studies of the preferences and actions of women in office at the local level are scarce and often contain conflicting results. The research presented here remedies the gap in the scholarship on women in local politics by examining the substantive policy effects of electing women to office while also addressing questions of whether the preferences of local politicians can effect welfare spending.

**Local Welfare Policies:**

Scholarship on the policymaking process in cities has generally focused on the idea that because local residents can move from city to city for very little cost (Tiebout 1956), cities have a strong incentive to tailor policies to fit local demand (Buchanan 1971). In addition, local governments are often largely fiscally independent, relying heavily on local taxes for funding (Oates 1972; Oates 1999). In his work on city policymaking, Peterson (1981) argues that, because residents and businesses can easily leave a city for one with a more favorable tax rate and policy base, cities must pursue developmental policies that will produce more marginal benefits than marginal costs for the average taxpayer. Peterson and other authors argue that funding for redistributive policies are first are cut or last funded when the city’s fiscal base drops or when the cost for the service increased (Kantor 1995; Peterson 1981). As such, the resources available to a city (in property value or tax base) should be an essential predictor of whether a city actively funds redistributional programs. Analyses of city governance have found that the
fiscal health of cities has a strong relationship with redistributional spending, supporting the fiscal federalism theory (Isaac and Kelly 1981; Peterson 1981; Sharp and Maynard-Moody 1991).

Alternative paradigms to understanding urban policymaking posit a preference for the needs of businesses, either through local governments bowing to the interests of growth machines (Logan and Molotch 1987) or by forming coalitions for governing with local businesses (Stone 1989). Another group of scholarship suggests that welfare spending originates in social disturbances (Piven and Cloward 1971; Sharp and Maynard-Moody 1991) or in need responsiveness (Chamlin 1987). Other research has focused on traditionally marginalized groups with interests in social welfare policies and their efforts to gain political incorporation (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Reed 1988; Welch and Bledsoe 1988). The scholarship suggests that these groups will face substantial institutional and political challenges when seeking to increase welfare expenditures (Burns 2006; Greenstone and Peterson 1976; Shefter 1992). Overall, the dominant understanding of local politics is that the funding of social welfare programs is bad for business and cities will shy from engaging in redistributional activities. At the same time, the Census of Governments routinely reveals high levels of spending on welfare, health, hospital, and community development programs. Why might cities be engaging in funding these programs? One possible answer is that the preferences of local elected officials are for city governments to provide redistributional programs. In particular, female politicians in local office may be pushing for the funding of programs that benefit women and children, most of which require welfare spending.

**Women in Public Office:**
The connection between the gender of a representative and policy outcomes has been established by a substantial body of scholarship (Carroll 2001; Norton 1999; Swers 2002; Vega and Firestone 1995; Welch and Thomas 1991). Generally, scholars have found that the presence of women in a political body results in changes in policy, including at the national level (Carroll 1984; Dolan 1997; Swers 1998, 2002; Vega and Firestone 1995); in state legislatures (Dodson and Carroll 1991; Dolan and Ford 1995; Reingold 2006; Saint-Germain 1989; Thomas 1991) and internationally (Broughton and Palmeri 1999; Chaney 1979; Schwindt-Bayer 2006). At the local level, however, the existing scholarship is very limited and those that have studied gender and urban politics often conclude “gender differences tend to decline with the level of office” (Boles 2001, 69).

In the United States, the scholarship on women in local office has concentrated on the attitudes of female mayors and city council members, with conflicting findings as to whether women express differing opinions from their male counterparts in office (Burns and Schumaker 1987; Flammang 1985; Mezey 1980; Schumaker and Burns 1988; Weikart et al. 2007). Looking at the effect of mayoral gender on policy outcomes, the existing scholarship has found significant relationships between the gender of mayors and policy outcomes, but is very limited in scope. In her 1986 article, Saltzstein finds that the presence of a female mayor increases female employment (1986), a finding echoed by Kerr, Miller, and Reid (1998). More recently, Smith (2010) has found that the presence of women in local office leads to the use of Community Development Block Grants for public service. Internationally, research on women serving municipal government shows a clear connection between descriptive representation and policy outcomes. Bratton and Ray (2002) find that women councilors in Norway do have a significant effect on the level of municipal day-care provided. Other scholars have used the natural
experiment presented by the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution\(^2\) to find that women in local office in India tend to pursue policies that are of interest to women living in their villages (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004).

Connecting women in public office and pro-welfare spending, scholars have demonstrated that, as part of the gender gap, women have high pro-social welfare attitudes than men (Andersen 1999; Shapiro and Mahajan 1986). Other scholars have found that women in local office have pro-social and anti-development attitudes (Burns and Schumaker 1987; Sapiro 1983; Schumaker and Burns 1988). Schumaker and Burns (1988) found that women were much more likely to oppose developments and were much more likely to support social service provisions by the local government. In addition, scholars have found that the presence of women in public office at higher levels leads to increases in expenditures on welfare policies (Besley and Case 2003; Kenny and Lott 1999; Rehavi 2007).

**Hypotheses:**

The gender of office holders has been shown to have an effect on policies in a wide variety of venues. While the scholarship on the effect of women in local office is limited, the connection between gendered attitudes about social welfare spending and the reality of municipal expenditures in these categories suggests the presence of women in local office may lead to limited increases in funding for social welfare programs. Specifically, I posit that the presence of a female mayor will have a positive, significant effect the probability that a city will participate in welfare spending (a yes/no option) and on the overall rate of welfare spending by the city. The gendered composition of the city council will have a similar effect. Furthermore, I predict that the interaction of a female mayor and the percentage of women on the council will increase the

\(^2\) The 73rd amendment mandated that women compose at least thirty percent of local councils of governing in India.
substantive effect of both the mayor and the female council members on participation in and spending on welfare programs.

Data and Methods:

To test these hypotheses, I collected information on the gender of mayors and city councilors of 300 randomly selected cities. Here, I present two years of data (2007 and 2008) on the composition of mayors and city council members. The data on the gendered composition of municipal leadership was collected through a combination of consulting each city’s website (when available) and calling each city’s clerk to inquire about the demographics of the current leaders. These methods resulted in coding of the gender of 219 mayors in 2007 and 247 mayors in 2008. Looking at the gender breakdown, just over sixteen percent of mayors (thirty-six) are female in 2007; the percent increases to eighteen percent (forty-five) in 2008. Looking at the city councils, women make up approximately 25% of city councils in both 2007 and 2008.

Insert Table 1 about here.

Looking at the numerical representation of women on city councils in 2007, women are most often a single representative; forty-three percent of the councils have one woman and eighty percent of councils have at least one woman. Looking at the same data for 2008, there is an overall increase in the number of cities with zero female (twenty-four percent) city councilors. Thirty-eight percent of councils have one woman. All together, these summary statistics suggest that, while women are underrepresented in city leadership as compared to each group’s representation in society, these groups occupy enough offices to potentially influence policy outcomes.

After selecting 300 cities for my sample, I dropped 14 of the cities from my sample, as they were labeled “CDP” or Census Designated Place. These areas, which are unincorporated, often have less formal governing bodies, and are inappropriate for the study.
After determining the gender of each mayor and city council member for each year, I obtained and coded each city’s most current budget, looking at the level for funding for welfare programs. After collecting budget data from the cities in my sample, I observed several trends. First, many cities simply do not fund social service or welfare programs in any obvious way. In these cities, the majority of the budget is dedicated to public safety, public works, and general government, with some attention paid to funding recreation and development activities; many cities do not fund welfare or redistributional programs at all. As such, I model the effect of female mayors and councilors in two ways: first, in a logit model that predicts whether a city will engage in any funding of redistributional programs, and second, looking only at those with some level of funding, in a ordinary least-squares model predicting the size of spending on redistributional programs.

The primary variables of interest are the presence of a female mayor and the percent of each city council that are female. As the fiscal condition of the city can have an effect on the level of redistributive programs provided, I control for the revenues raised per capita, as well as the per capita grant income. Previous scholarship has shown that the economic state of residents in each city will have a large effect on demand for welfare and redistributive programs, as well as on the ability for the city to provide these programs (Sharp and Maynard-Moody 1991). I control for socio-economic factors by including the median household income, the percent of the population that received public assistance income, the poverty rate, the percent of the population with a high school diploma or higher, and the percent of population that is nonwhite in the analysis. In the models for 2008 spending, I also control for the presence and level of welfare spending in 2007, as with each program that is funded, certain elements are institutionalized. The

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4 I include the per capita grant income, as the extant literature has suggested that cities may use grants to pay for redistributive programs.
process of setting up a bureaucracy and employing workers, as well as investments by non-profits and community groups, all spur a continued funding of programs, leading to a positive relationship between funding in 2008 and 2007.

**Findings: the Decision to Participate**

To begin, I investigated some general patterns of spending in cities with male and female mayors. Generally, cities with female mayors are more likely to fund welfare and redistributional programs at all and spend more – in both 2007 and 2008 – than cities with male mayors. In 2007, 76% of cities with female mayors participated in redistributional policy funding and these cities spent just over $26 per capita on redistributional services. In 2008, 74% of female-governed cities funded welfare programs, with an average of $28 spent per resident.

Those cities with male mayors participated in welfare spending at a lower rate (60% in 2007 and 61% in 2008 of cities funding at least one welfare program) and spent $14 in 2007 and $10 in 2008, far less than the cities with a female mayor. While these comparisons are very preliminary, they demonstrate basic support for the basic concept of female mayors spending more on welfare programs.

I next examine the effect of a female mayor and the percent of female council members on the choice to participate in the funding of welfare programs. Here, I use logit modeling to predict whether female representatives influence whether a city engages in funding, with city level socio-economic, institutional, and budgetary controls.

Insert Table 2 about here.

The presence of a female mayor has a positive, significant effect on welfare spending in both 2007 and 2008. I find no evidence that the percentage of female city council members has a positive effect on the propensity to engage in welfare spending. The interaction between the
presence of a female mayor and the percent of the council that are female is significant in both years, indicating that the percentage of women on a council has an effect on spending, but only in the presence of a female mayor. Overall, very few of the control variables are significant. Substantively, the presence of a female mayor has a strong effect on the participation of city in welfare programs. In 2007, the presence of a female mayor leads to a 14% increase in the probability that a city participates in welfare programs; in 2008, the effect grows to a 16% increase in the probability of participation under a female mayor (Bratton 2007; Bratton and Ray 2002; Kanter 1977).

Examining the interactive effect of the percentage of women on each city’s council and the presence of a female mayor, I find that the substantive effect of a female mayor is increased by higher levels of female representation on the council, if the percentage of women on the council passes twenty percent. If a female mayor is present, the percentage of women on the council also has a substantive effect on the propensity to fund; moving from the 2007 mean (25%) to the maximum (100%) leads to a 10% increase in the probability that a city funds a welfare program. The interactive effect of a female mayor and women on the council suggests that women on city councils are interested in funding welfare programs, but that a level of representation coupled with a female in the executive position is required. These findings are consistent with the scholarship that has found women in office are often limited by the ability to enact change by tokenism limited numbers (Bratton 2007; Bratton and Ray 2002; Kanter 1977).

The Level of Funding:

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5 All effect sizes for logistic regressions are calculated using CLARIFY.
6 The substantive effects for the interactive terms of calculated using the linear combinations of estimators (lincom) command in Stata, which computes point estimates and significance for interactive terms.
Looking next at the effect of women in local office on the level of spending on welfare programs once the city decides to participate in these programs, I find similar results. As shown in Table 3, the presence of a female mayor has a substantively and statistically significant effect on welfare spending. The level of female representation on city councils does not have an independent effect on welfare spending.

The interaction between a female mayor and the percentage of the council that are women is statistically significant and positive, as expected. Substantively, the presence of a female mayor increases in effect size as the percentage of female council members grows.

As Figure 2 shows, the substantive effect of a female mayor increases in a linear fashion, from $3.07 (when women are 15% of the council) to $6.58 (when women are 30% of the council) as the percentage of the city council increases, after representation by women on the city council reaches 10%. The substantive effect of the percent of women on city council, in the presence of a female mayor, is also large; for example, moving from the 2007 mean percentage of women on the council (25%) to the maximum (100%) results in a $12.94 increase in per capita welfare spending. In the presence of a male mayor, the percentage of women on the city council does not have a statistically significant effect on welfare spending.

**Conclusion:**

In examining the puzzle of a theoretical argument against the provision of welfare services and a reality of extensive participation of cities in welfare programs, scholars have ignored the potential for the gender composition of municipal leadership to affect welfare provision. Here, I

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7 The level of funding for welfare programs is estimated only on those cities who participate in some level of welfare spending, which reduces the number of observations but avoids problems with modeling data with excessive zeros.
present research to fill both the gap and the overall lack of research on female leaders in cities. Examining the effect of female mayors and council members on the provision of welfare services and welfare spending, I find that the presence of a female mayor has a positive and substantively significant effect on both a city’s participation in any welfare program and the amount of funding a city dedicates to welfare programs. The percentage of female city council members has no direct effect on either participation or spending, but the percentage of women on the council has a positive effect when a female mayor is present.

One very important finding from my research is that female leaders must be in a position of power before we see the traditional relationship between women in office and policy changes at the urban level. Female mayors have a positive effect on welfare spending and while female city council members do not appear to have a significant straightforward effect on spending, they do positively affect spending on welfare and redistributional programs in the presence of a female mayor.

Second, the research presented here demonstrates that it is important to be sure to include local political factors in explanations of municipal policymaking and spending patterns. The gender of the mayor has a large effect on both participation in and funding of welfare programs. Examinations of the realities of municipal funding – particularly the realities of welfare funding – must include an evaluation of the effect of political leaders on these decisions. In addition, the finding that the gender of local representatives has an effect on spending is evidence that gender differences stand firm at the local level, even in an environment where the funding of social welfare policies is seen as taboo.
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Tables and Figures:
Fig. 1: The Substantive Effect of a Female Mayor on the Probability of Participating in Welfare Services, by % of Council that are Women

Fig. 2: The Substantive Effect of a Female Mayor on Spending on Welfare Programs, by % of Council that are Women
Table 1: Distribution of Female City Council Members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of seats held by women</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of cities with this number of women</td>
<td></td>
<td>Number of cities with this number of women</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Female Mayor and the Provision of Welfare Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefficient (St. Error)</td>
<td>Coefficient (St. Error)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Mayor</td>
<td>0.911** (0.241)</td>
<td>2.288* (0.921)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of council female</td>
<td>0.597 (1.542)</td>
<td>1.611 (1.258)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Mayor * % council female</td>
<td>0.716** (0.114)</td>
<td>5.661* (2.526)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Income</td>
<td>0.0000215 (0.0000254)</td>
<td>0.0000298 (0.0000246)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Poverty</td>
<td>3.745 (5.598)</td>
<td>4.286 (4.080)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% H.S. diploma</td>
<td>0.884 (4.655)</td>
<td>-0.722 (3.434)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Public Assistance</td>
<td>3.529 (3.372)</td>
<td>3.644 (2.422)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Non-white</td>
<td>-0.656 (1.393)</td>
<td>1.547 (1.411)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenue (per capita)</td>
<td>0.00000142 (0.00000939)</td>
<td>0.000138 (0.000173)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grants (per capita)</td>
<td>0.000562 (0.000967)</td>
<td>0.00464 (0.00432)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 Provision</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0.546 (0.444)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.224 (2.663)</td>
<td>-3.639 (2.512)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| N                              | 223         | 238         |
| Pseudo $R^2$                   | 0.1456      | 0.231       |

Standard errors in parentheses; + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$
Table 3: Female Mayor and Council members and the Amount of Welfare Funding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007 Coefficient (St. Error)</th>
<th>2008 Coefficient (St. Error)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female Mayor</td>
<td>36.44** (11.43)</td>
<td>29.55** (9.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of council female</td>
<td>3.137 (45.48)</td>
<td>-155.6 (138.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Mayor * % council female</td>
<td>121.2* (54.2)</td>
<td>105.5* (55.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Income</td>
<td>-0.000231 (0.000507)</td>
<td>0.000127 (0.00188)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Poverty</td>
<td>-84.13 (156.7)</td>
<td>67.10 (376.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% H.S. diploma</td>
<td>-104.4 (140.4)</td>
<td>288.0 (363.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Public Assistance</td>
<td>-17.46 (112.7)</td>
<td>219.9 (235.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Non-white</td>
<td>65.04 (46.94)</td>
<td>-146.7 (126.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenue (per capita)</td>
<td>0.0000770** (0.0000146)</td>
<td>0.0357* (0.0173)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grants (per capita)</td>
<td>0.0193 (0.0469)</td>
<td>0.466 (0.337)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 Amount of Welfare Funding</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.459** (0.374)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>70.95 (73.48)</td>
<td>-162.1 (219.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.506</td>
<td>0.583</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses; + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01