

Congresswomen Interrupted: Fighting for Time on Women's Issues

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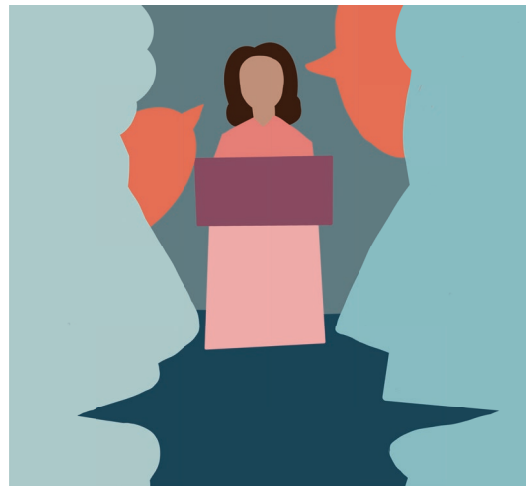
"Mr. Vice President, I'm speaking—I'm speaking," asserted the then-senator Kamala Harris during the 2020 Vice Presidential debate. Former Vice President, Mike Pence, had repeatedly interrupted Kamala Harris, now Vice President, during the debate, highlighting a problem that women are all too familiar with. How prevalent, if at all, is this issue for even our own congresswomen? Are congresswomen more likely to be interrupted than their male counterparts? Or do congressmen also face similar challenges? It's important for Members of Congress to communicate their ideas to be effective lawmakers, yet interruptions may make that more challenging. Michael G. Miller and Joseph L. Sutherland raise these questions in their recent *American Political Science Review* [article](#). To investigate, they examine speech patterns during congressional hearings, and they find that women in Congress are indeed more likely to be interrupted than men – but also that there's more to it than meets the eye. Their findings raise important implications on women's issues, particularly given the recent debate over women's reproductive freedoms.

Miller and Sutherland argue that communication during Congressional committee hearings is especially important for Members of Congress to get their work done and demonstrate their expertise in policy areas. Specifically, committee hearings are, among other things, used to get feedback on proposed legislation, and are where Committee Members voice their opinions to or engage in debate with their fellow Congress Members. At the same time, committee hearings are less restrictive with regard to the treatment of Members. Therefore, Miller and Sutherland expect that congresswomen are more likely to



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experience interruptions during committee hearings when compared to congressmen. They also expect that women are more likely to experience what they call "rapid-fire interruptions" where women "battle" with others over control of the conversation. In addition to gender, other factors may influence the likelihood that a Congress Member is interrupted during a committee hearing, specifically: the type of policy being discussed, the chamber (i.e., the House or the Senate), and a Member's political party, institutional power, seniority, or their length of speech.



Madelyn Dewey

Using data from the Government Printing Office (GPO), Miller and Sutherland analyze greater than 24,000 congressional hearings from 1994-2018 (105th–115th Congresses), giving them transcripts from over 1200 Members of Congress. The GPO coded interruptions in the form of "en- or em-dashes" (indicated as "—") at the end of a chunk of speech. Miller and Sutherland only code for an interruption in a speech chunk if the dashes were present within the last ten characters of the chunk. They find greater than 150,000 interruptions out of a total of 3 million speech chunks. Exploring the relationship between gender and interruptions, they find that there is a ten percent

increase in the probability of interruption for a woman in the Senate relative to men, while they find no similar pattern for a woman in the House.

To determine whether congresswomen are interrupted when they are discussing women's issues, they develop a list of keywords and consult the Routledge International Encyclopedia of Global Women's Issues and Knowledge (i.e., women's health issues, women's family issues, abortion, etc.), using them to classify nearly 4,000 hearings (15.8% of total hearings) as addressing a women's issue. They find that in such hearings, the speaker is more likely to be interrupted, regardless of their gender, but especially if the speaker is a woman. Overall, women are, on average, 2.3 times more likely to be interrupted when discussing women's issues compared to other issues. However, there are notable differences between chambers when it comes to interruptions for women's issues: in the Senate, women are

1.5 times more likely to be interrupted, while in the House they are 6 times more likely to be interrupted. Additionally, institutional power (i.e., being part of the majority party and being chair of the committee), political party (i.e., being Republican), and length of speech decreases the likelihood of being interrupted.

Seniority, however, appears to work differently – while both congressmen and women are more likely to be interrupted as they gain seniority, this trend is stronger for men in both chambers. In addition, as women gain seniority, they do not become more aggressive in interruptions, when compared to men with the same level of seniority, suggesting that they do not develop a more “masculine communication style” to fend off interruptions. Finally, women in both chambers are more likely to be involved in a rapid-fire interruption cluster, particularly in hearings involving women’s issues. Specifically, women are 44 times more likely to have to fight for time on women’s issues relative to men in Congressional hearings overall. In the House and Senate, women are 6 times and 1.3 times, respectively, more likely than men in the Senate to have to fight for their time on women’s issues. Miller and Sutherland also find some evidence

that suggests that interruptions in Congress occur more often in mixed-gender interactions and that men interrupt women more often than they do other men.

In sum, Miller and Sutherland find that congresswomen, particularly those involved in Senate committee hearings and those who discuss women’s issues, are more likely to be interrupted. These findings highlight one of the many challenges that women in Congress face compared to men. Women in Congress that fight for women’s issues and win-win while confronting challenges that men do not face as often. Miller and Sutherland encourage future researchers to consider how these conditions for women’s policymaking may vary depending on the topic, as well as the extent to which the conditions influence effectiveness in pursuing their legislative agenda. Finally, given the current debate on reproductive freedoms that is now in the hands of the Supreme Court, what implications do these findings have on the future of women across the United States?

MILLER, MICHAEL G., and JOSEPH L. SUTHERLAND. 2022. “The Effect of Gender on Interruptions at Congressional Hearings.” *American Political Science Review*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000260>

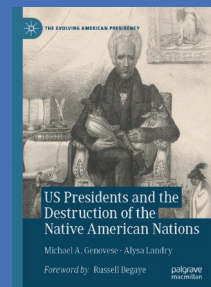
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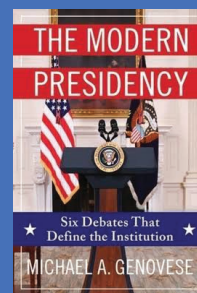
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