

## THE WOMEN'S RIGHTS LOBBY IN THE GENDER GAP CONGRESS, 1983-84

**Joan Hulse Thompson**  
**Beaver College**

*This paper analyzes the successes and failures of the women's rights lobby during the 98th Congress, when the media made the "gender gap" a political watchword and legislators were unusually anxious to show support for women's issues. A similarly favorable climate had existed ten years earlier, but the women's interest groups were new to lobbying, had little coordination and were unable to attract coalition partners among more established groups. This time they had the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues as a liaison to over 100 House members, an agreed agenda called the Economic Equity Act and 165 allied organizations making up the Leadership Conference for Civil Rights. By playing the gender gap the Caucus and women lobbyists were able to win enactment of pension reform and child support enforcement legislation. While the gender gap is no longer in the headlines, some momentum has been retained.*

The 98th Congress, 1983-84, was the "Gender Gap Congress," and proponents of women's issues achieved some notable successes as politicians of both parties sought to demonstrate their responsiveness to women's concerns. The term "gender gap" is "widely used to describe the difference between the percentage of votes a candidate received from women voters and the percentage received from men" (Baxter and Lansing, 1983, p. 180). The gender gap was a major preoccupation of the media and therefore a cause for concern among members of Congress. At least 80 magazine articles dealing with Republican fears and Democratic hopes for the women's vote appeared in the three-year period from early 1982 to the end of 1984.<sup>1</sup> Although the votes of women did not, as some had predicted, determine the presidential election of 1984, the scramble for the support of women did lead to the selection of the first woman vice-presidential candidate by a major political

## Commonwealth

party.<sup>2</sup> In Congress as well, the focus was on the congresswomen and on the issues perceived as important to women.

Within the House of Representatives, the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues, a bipartisan legislative service organization led by congresswomen but including congressmen as supporting members, was able to expand its visibility and influence. The Caucus develops and promotes women's policy initiatives by coordinating the efforts of committed legislators and the lobbying of feminist interest groups. Ten years earlier, the 92nd Congress, 1973-74, presented a similarly favorable environment because of the momentum generated by the successful drive for congressional passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. At that time, however, the women's rights lobby<sup>3</sup> was only just emerging in Washington and the Caucus had not yet been established. By 1983-84, women's rights advocates were better organized to capitalize on the gender gap, but they faced a new problem as well as a major opportunity. Women's issues had become strongly partisan because the women's vote was perceived as predominately pro-Democratic.

In order to study women's issues in the 98th Congress, the author worked for the Caucus as an American Association of University Women Fellow from June 2 to August 3, 1983 and returned the following summer to continue research. A total of sixty-seven people, including personal and committee staff, current and former Caucus staff, and interest group representatives, were interviewed, some of them more than once. The author also kept a daily journal during the summer of 1983, reviewed Caucus files in 1984, and attended two meetings of the Executive Committee which is composed solely of congresswomen. In 1985, the author spoke again with Anne Radigan, the second ranking Caucus staff person in 1983 and director of the Caucus from April 1984 to October 1986. She is quoted by name, but other sources were promised anonymity, so their statements are quoted without attribution.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Women's Lobby in the 92nd and 98th Congress**

Following the 1984 election, Anne Radigan remarked that "1974 was a good year (for women's issues) and so was 1984." During the 92nd Congress, the women's lobby successfully advocated the extension of the minimum wage law to domestic workers, the Women's Education Equity Act and the Equal Credit Opportunity Act. In her case study of the passage of the 1974 Equal Credit bill, Anne N. Costain concluded that the women's rights lobby lacked adequate information on technical aspects of the proposals and effective coordination among the separate groups. "The women's lobby

through its internal disagreement was forced to forfeit initiative on the legislation to congressional sponsors” (Costain, 1979, p. 104).

The women’s groups could not secure technical information from experienced consumer groups because their lack of coordination made them appear too disorganized to be good coalition partners. Although the emerging women’s rights lobby was able to focus congressional attention on equal credit proposals, its weaknesses meant that its “ability to influence specific provisions in the legislation became minimal” (Constain, 1979, p. 104). The women’s groups could not agree on what compromises were an acceptable price to pay for an equal credit law, so their supporters in Congress had to make that crucial strategic decision without them.

Fortunately, “the women’s rights lobby had a built-in constituency within the House” (Costain, 1979, p. 89). Senator William Brock (R-TN) and Congressman Edward Koch (D-NY) made equal credit legislation a personal priority and many of the congresswomen took “an almost proprietary concern about the activities of the women’s rights lobby” (Costain, 1979, p. 89).

Margaret Heckler of Massachusetts, the prime Republican House sponsor of the Equal Credit law in 1974, was one of the founders of the Congresswomen’s Caucus in 1977. The Caucus was established to provide staff support and an organizational vehicle for the Congresswomen who shared the perspectives of the women’s right’s lobby.<sup>5</sup>

The central premise of the Caucus has been a commitment to the Equal Rights Amendment. After President Reagan was elected on a platform which did not include the ERA, Caucus membership became more politically risky for Republican congresswomen. None of those elected in 1980 joined in their first term and the congresswomen’s Caucus, never financially secure, became dependent on congressmen and feminists outside Congress who subscribed to its newsletter, *Update* (Gertzog, 1984, pp. 216, 220). When a 1981 House rules change forced the Congresswomen’s Caucus to choose between losing office space on the Hill and total dependence on membership dues, the women decided to expand.

During the 97th Congress, the Congresswomen’s Caucus invited congressmen to become non-voting members at reduced dues and changed its name to the Congressional Caucus for Women’s Issues. The group rapidly expanded from 10 to over 100 members including the Speaker and Majority Whip, although it still did not include all congresswomen. While none of the women members held committee chairs and only a few headed subcommittees, the male members had party and committee leadership posts which could translate into political clout.

## Commonwealth

Outside Congress, the Women's Rights Lobby in 1983 and 1984 was still composed of groups with different political styles and issue positions. For instance, the American Association of University Women could generate letters from its members while the National Organization for Women was more likely to have members who wanted to take direct action. Furthermore, like the legislators in the Caucus, these groups were divided in their views on abortion. About the same time that the Caucus was adding men, however, it found a program to unify its members in Congress and allied women's rights groups. For the 98th Congress, the Caucus assumed the pivotal role in coordinating the development and passage of the Economic Equity Act. The EEA was designed to recognize the economic contributions of lifetime homemakers, benefit women of all social classes and force the insurance industry to abandon sex classifications.

It sought to assure elderly homemakers survivors pensions, children in single-parent homes financial support from the absent parent, refundable child care tax credits for the working poor, tax credits for companies who hire displaced homemakers, adequate retirement accounts for fulltime homemakers, and nondiscrimination in insurance coverage and rates. "Playing economic issues" worked politically because getting women more pay and economic security meant both helping constituents and saving the government welfare costs. The insurance industry was a priority target for the National Organization for Women and others who believed it had financed the lobbying that defeated the ERA at the state level. Other provisions were especially appealing to moderates in the Caucus and the women's movement and some could even be expected to gain support from conservative legislators. Focusing on economic equity was the key. It made the alarming growth in the proportion of the poor who were elderly women or mothers with children the primary concern instead of abstract legal rights which were subject to misrepresentation by opponents.

An EEA was first presented in 1981 by Senator David Durenberger (R-MN) as a package of bills which would cost the federal government little while improving economic prospects for millions of women, but only minor portions passed. With abortion heating up emotions on both sides and the ERA defeated for the present, the new EEA was intended to draw public attention, win some victories, and provide some real help.<sup>6</sup>

It was the Caucus that put the expanded EEA package together in consultation with staff from both Houses of Congress, kept track of its progress, and advocated the enactment of each of its parts. "An individual office couldn't put the EEA together," said one staffer. "If we didn't have the Caucus, we wouldn't have the Equity Act."

As coordinator of the EEA, the Caucus could focus the congressional response to the gender gap, mobilizing its members behind those portions which appeared most viable and placing pressure on the administration to support economic opportunity for women. The women's rights groups took part in developing the EEA and the package included elements designed to balance their various interests. Furthermore, since Ralph Neas, formerly on Durenberger's staff and now Executive Director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, had helped put together the original EEA, the most controversial element of the expanded EEA was a priority for the entire civil rights community of 165 national organizations. The LCCR established a Task Force on Insurance Discrimination to coordinate the lobbying efforts of women's rights groups, labor unions, civil rights groups, religious organizations and consumer groups for unisex insurance complimenting the efforts of the Caucus.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, when the gender gap made women's issues politically advantageous, once again the women's rights groups were in a far better position to capitalize on the moment than they had been ten years earlier. They had the Caucus within the House, allies among older, better financed organizations outside Congress and a balanced, broadly based agenda, the 1983-84 Economic Equity Act.

By mid-1984, Congress had passed a jobs bill, pension reform and child support legislation. All were Caucus successes. However, neither a bill to clarify the meaning of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and overturn the narrow interpretation given it in the Supreme Court *Grove City College* case, nor another Caucus supported bill, a provision for a pay equity study of federal employment, were able to surmount Senate opposition despite overwhelming passage in the House. Although it never emerged from committee, the Caucus-backed bill to eliminate sex discrimination by the insurance industry gained so much momentum that the industry spent approximately \$4 million to prevent its passage. Also unsuccessful was an effort to again secure congressional passage of the Equal Rights Amendment.

### **Impact of the Gender Gap**

In its analysis of the 1st session of the 98th Congress, the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* cited the gender gap as a "crucial political tool," giving women's issues "new prominence in Congress" (1983, p. 289-90). The accomplishments of 1984 were described as the result of an "election year effort to prove its commitment of women's issues" (*Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 1984, p. 163). The politics of the gender gap provided an

opportunity which the women's rights lobby along with the caucus of concerned legislators used to get action on most of their priorities in the 98th Congress.

First of all, the gender gap enabled the Caucus to attract more male members. During the 98th Congress, total membership rose from 86 to 132. Perceiving a women's vote, members of Congress were anxious to find a concrete way to demonstrate their support and joining the Caucus gave them that. Feminist wives and staff members sometimes convinced congressmen to take a special interest in women's issues, but the gender gap was paramount. "Money and votes are what count here." This is not to say that the men in the Caucus are not committed to its goals, but "pure motives" are rare, unexpected, and quite unnecessary in politics.

Some congressmen publicized their Caucus membership by sending out copies of *Update*, letters on women's issues or special topic newsletters to those constituents who headed women's organizations or had written them on women's issues. Others devoted a section of a district-wide newsletter to women's issues and at least one had his Caucus membership included with his committee assignments on his official letterhead.

The gender gap meant that a constituency existed for women's issues. Under House rules, the Caucus cannot involve itself directly in electoral politics, but women's rights groups make modest contributions, provide endorsements and can be an important source of campaign volunteers. The National Federation of Business and Professional Women, for instance, has 3,500 clubs nationwide and, according to their lobbyist, includes Caucus membership on its reports on legislative voting records.

For congressmen, uncertain about the power of the gender gap, Caucus membership provided "insurance against a woman opponent." If she could not attack him on women's issues, she could not use the gender gap against him, for women cannot effectively appeal for votes on their gender alone (Perkins and Fowlkes, 1980). And regardless of his opponent, having supported women's issues, a congressman can ask congresswomen from his party to appear at his fundraisers and otherwise campaign for him. For instance, in his 1984 defeat of Senator Charles Percy, (R-IL), Congressman Paul Simon (D-IL) had campaign help from Democratic congresswomen and major support from women's groups in his primary and general election contests. Simon used his Caucus membership and targeted Percy on economic equity issues using Caucus materials, even though their positions on ERA and abortion were similar.

By giving so many men incentives to join, the gender gap saved the Caucus financially. The large membership put it on a solid financial footing

for the first time and allowed the director to add another permanent staff person to cover legislative priorities, especially the EEA, in close contact with the women's rights lobby and their coalition partners.

The gender gap was a savior in another, nonmaterial sense as well. With the demise of the ERA, the women's movement was defeated and discouraged about its future. The gender gap rekindled spirits as it brought them back a sense of political power. "The gender gap was a boon for the women's movement and therefore for the Caucus." And for the Caucus it came at a particularly good time because the 1981 budget battle and the bitter 1982 contest between Republican Margaret Heckler and Democrat Barney Frank, Massachusetts incumbents redistricted against each other, had very nearly destroyed prospects for bipartisanship. Without the gender gap, the Caucus might have disintegrated and with it would have gone an important vehicle for coordinating initiatives and lobbying for women.

The gender gap engendered competition for the women's vote both substantively and in terms of public relations. The President did not want to do less than Republican members of Congress were willing to do either on child support or on pensions. As Senator Dole prepared a pension reform bill, the White House instructed the Labor Department to develop one as well. There was a "race to the hopper" which Senator Dole won. The part played by Elizabeth Dole, former White House Assistant and then Secretary of Transportation, is unknown, but on the Hill it is widely believed that she "planted the seed in Bob's mind" on pensions and was a potent force inside the administration prodding the President to support both pension reform and child support enforcement for families not on welfare. If so, the gender gap certainly helped make her point.

The Republican Party evidenced strong concern about the gender gap. William Greener, director of communications for the Republican National Committee, was quoted in October 1982 saying, "We realize we have a problem (with women voters). We are working to decrease it" (*New York Times*, 1982b). In Congress, the Republican Conference discussed the Economic Equity Act, with Caucus co-chair Olympia Snowe giving the presentation on pensions. The House Wednesday Group, a moderate Republican caucus, produced a "Special Report on Women in American Society" intended to "re-invigorate the long-standing link between women's issues and the Republican Party" (Van Dyke, 1984, p. 1).

The gender gap offered an opportunity to Republican congresswomen who wanted to return the Republican Party to the cause of women's rights. In February 1983 with the 98th Congress just underway, six Republican congresswomen, three of them members of the Caucus<sup>8</sup> called a press

## Commonwealth

conference to request that the President meet with them about women's issues. The challenge worked. At the meeting with Reagan and at subsequent ones with presidential assistant Michael Deaver, the women made their case for the Equity Act bills as a way to fulfill a 1980 platform pledge to support equal opportunity for women without the ERA. As follow-up, congressional aides sent "lots of information (on the Equity Act) to the White House." One staff aide described how she took "Caucus stuff and put it in Republican terms." That meant referring to day care, for instance, as a "family issue" and presenting the public relations advantages that would ensue from a presidential endorsement. The gender gap was crucial to the case, of course. Democratic congresswomen also felt that the gender gap had given them an "asset we can trade with." In a sense, they were perceived as political bosses with the women's vote to deliver. Being a woman in Congress thus became an advantage as the parties positioned themselves to compete for the women's vote in 1984.

Progress for women's issues was often a by-product of party competition. In July 1983 Marge Roukema (R-NJ), who is not a member of the Caucus, went to the President and the press to launch a mandatory wage assignment bill as her answer to inadequate child support collection. The surge of favorable publicity for Roukema probably prodded Senator Bill Bradley (D-NJ) to focus on the issue and he ultimately played an important role in Senate passage. No senator, especially one like Bradley with presidential ambitions, can just sit back and watch while a House member from the same state rides a tidal wave of good press coverage.

Roukema's brief success rankled people at the Caucus as well. Their bill had been first and the prime sponsor, Barbara Kennelly (D-CT), was well positioned on the appropriate Ways and Means subcommittee. While Roukema got the feature stories, it was Kennelly who had persuaded the reluctant subcommittee chairman to call a hearing. Kennelly and the Caucus did get the recognition they deserved when a measure finally passed, and in retrospect it seemed that the public attention to the issue and the fact that Roukema's bill made the Caucus proposal look moderate in comparison probably contributed to the Caucus's and Kennelly's success.

In addition to individual political rivalries, women's legislation also benefited from competition between the Democratic House and the Republican Senate. The House passed the child support bill first and that "forced the Senate to act." A conference committee compromised on the matching formula and accepted the strongest provisions of each bill. On pensions the Senate moved first and the "really pushed the House to get a



very strong bill.” Neither chamber wanted to be accused of doing less for women.

Political competition also affected committee consideration of the Equity Act. For instance, the Education and Labor Committee which produced one version of the pension reform bill had a tradition of operating with bipartisan consensus. Initially, the conservative pension expert, John Erlenborn (R-IL), showed “no enthusiasm” because the bill would “do things opposite from what he wanted” on private pensions. However, aware that the bill would not go if he objected, Erlenborn “didn’t want to be in the position of seeming to be the one to stop it.” His price was one amendment. Not only did he then go along with the bill, but he even “came on first” on a key provision for survivors before the administration agreed to it. That was “hard for him.”

In general, because of the partisan competition for the women’s vote, Democrats could win Republican support if they were united. The Republicans would bargain for concessions, but they did not want to be portrayed as anti-women. The one defeat in the House came on insurance, when Democrats failed to hold together. When Democrats held together in the House, they could pass bills alone, but it was still to their advantage to seek Republican support in order to improve the bill’s chances in the Senate and with the President.

A woman lobbyist working the 98th Congress observed that “the gender gap hangs over it.” It gave her and all of the coalition behind the Caucus clout. Although many were realistic enough to know that they might “be disappointed in November and lose steam,” there were opportunities for media exposure and legislative influence none had known before. “Most members (of Congress) for years didn’t have any staff on women’s issues.” The gender gap changed that. Although the women suffered defeats as well as victories, the gender gap played “a huge role” in expanding the power of the Caucus and the women’s rights lobby in the 98th Congress.

### **Failure, Problems, and Second Thought**

Partisan politics fueled the drive for enactment of initiatives for women, but it also caused difficulties for the women’s rights lobby and especially for the Congressional Caucus. With only a dozen Republicans among its over 100 members, the Caucus had to be especially careful not to alienate them. That is why it is headed by Democratic and Republican co-chairs rather than by one congresswomen. The only way for “the work to get done is on a bipartisan basis,” said one aide. Advocacy by Republican congresswomen “is

important for the cause” of women’s issues, echoed another. A separate Democratic or Republican women’s issues caucus “would look like a play for votes--not really for women,” explained a third. By being bipartisan the Caucus says that its membership places concern for women’s issues before politics.

The gender gap put a severe strain on bipartisanship, however. Democratic congresswomen saw political advantage in attacking the President and his party, hoping to create not merely a gender gap but a “gender chasm” for them. Republican congresswomen in the Caucus “walked a fine line,” criticizing specific Reagan policies or positions but remaining Republicans. The Republicans very much wanted the President to endorse the Equity Act. The Democrats, on the other hand, wanted to use Reagan’s failure to support their issues against him and his party in 1984.

The women’s groups also faced the question of whether it was better to make compromises and get some changes in the law or go down fighting with the goal of using the issue in the 1984 election. Would the 99th Congress be better for women? Could the gender gap defeat President Reagan? Should women place all their hopes on a Democratic victory or hedge their bets by seeking allies among Republicans in Congress? And most importantly, if a bipartisan coalition enacted a bill, who would get the credit? It is easy for Democrats to conclude that of course their party should champion the cause of women as victims of poverty and discrimination. That is “more their constituency.” Therefore, “partisanship is inherent in the issues.” But others were anxious “to bring Republicans along on women’s issues” in order to get results. A Republican staff aide remarked that “Democrats try to turn women’s issues into Democratic issues. It puts off Republicans and probably loses some support.”

The ERA in the 98th Congress, despite the coordinated efforts of the Caucus Executive Committee, “seemed to become a Democratic issue.” Although it was true that President Reagan and his 1980 platform did not support the ERA, not all Republicans in the House had abandoned their party’s historic commitment. Working with the women’s groups, the Democratic leadership brought up the amendment hoping for passage, of course, but intent primarily on creating an election issue for their party. They wanted to build up their credit with the women’s groups and to establish that the Republicans were to blame for ERA’s failure. Republicans who supported ERA argued that it was Democratically controlled state legislatures that had defeated it and that the President had no constitutional role in approving amendments. Partisan politics was intense with the women’s vote at stake.

Democratic Caucus Co-Chair Pat Schroeder and Civil and Constitutional Rights Subcommittee Chairman Don Edwards (D-CA), a Caucus member, were consulted by the Speaker on strategy to avoid crippling amendments, but not as representatives of the Caucus. The Caucus staff told the leadership "don't tell us anything when you don't want Republicans to know." Therefore, the Caucus office did not know about the procedure to be used for the ERA vote "until the day before" it came up. Realizing the political motives behind the vote, the Republican women, who had been lobbying their Republican colleagues all session, felt betrayed. The Caucus "nearly lost all the Republican women over ERA. They did not feel that they had been consulted on the closed rule." It was not easy to convince them that the Democratic leadership made the decision and the "Caucus wasn't consulted either."

Political credit was again at issue when pension reform and child support enforcement were nearing the President's desk. Having been titles in the Equity Act, they were officially bipartisan. But sharing credit with Senators Durenberger and Dole and within the Caucus was not the same as having the President try to take it all for himself and his party in a carefully staged signing ceremony. Presidential support had come rather late in each case and only under pressure. Said a Democratic staff participant, "The White House was conspicuous by its absence...but it is going to try to take credit, of course." In an effort to retain some credit for itself, the Caucus sponsored a press conference in the Capitol after congressional passage in August 1984. The gender gap made credit on women's issues both more valuable and harder to hold onto.

In retrospect, several experienced participants concluded that pension reform had "passed too easily." The prime sponsor, Geraldine Ferraro, chose to follow her political style of pragmatism, but perhaps she "should have been more greedy," at least at the outset. The politics of the gender gap made pension reform a race to see "who could get on this quicker." Anxious for a victory and uncertain of their new power, the women's groups planned future pension reform bills rather than pushing their ideas before that Congress. A lobbyist spoke of the 1984 bill as a start, with major pension reform "6 to 10 years down the road." More realistically, a committee staff member talked not of building on the one bill but of letting it "mellow out for awhile."

In contrast to pensions, where the women's groups and the Caucus may have asked for too little, on insurance the gender gap seemed to force them to rush the issue, without sufficient public education, and ask for too much. An issue has to be "primed," especially one as complex as insurance

## Commonwealth

discrimination. The gender gap helped launch it, but when the insurance industry put on an opposition media blitz, the momentum turned around. Feminist staff members concluded from constituent mail that the public did not understand the bill at all. A major resource of the women's groups should have been their grassroots members, but the insurance industry's mass media and direct mail campaign generated a flood of opposition mail in comparison to the trickle of individual letters from group members. According to a committee staff participant, "the women's groups had far too many issues going to take this fight on." The task of grassroots organization was too great and too expensive.

Overwhelmed by outside tactics, the proponents might have tried to rely on long-term relationships with members and staff, but they had never before worked on a bill with the Energy and Commerce Committee. Again, it was the insurance industry that had most of the key contacts. The proponents wanted the non-discrimination bill considered civil rights legislation, but a majority of members and their staffers adopted the view advanced by the insurance industry that it should be judged as a bill extending government regulation of business.

The proponents did have the Committee Chairman, John Dingell, as their prime sponsor but despite his reputation he did not pressure members to vote with him against an anxious constituency. The legislation was evidently not that important to him. Dingell "didn't trade any votes over it;" "he didn't strong arm anybody and he can do that." The insurance industry could claim that "Dingell was unhappy with the whole thing in terms of the time it was taking and the disruption it was causing in the committee." The gender gap encouraged the groups and the Caucus to pursue the insurance bill, but ultimately even it was used against them. According to the insurance industry's portrayal, the bill had been hastily drafted and was racing towards passage without serious consideration. Congressmen were abdicating their responsibilities in order to please radical feminists who really did not represent the interests of average American women. Even the commitment of the proponents to helping women was questioned. The insurance industry claimed that the Caucus bill would hurt rather than help most women.

The gender gap had lured the Caucus and its allies into a fight for which they were not really prepared. The Executive Committee of congresswomen is the core of the Caucus and even some of them had unanswered questions about this highly technical bill. The advantage for women was not clear cut and the insurance industry was not going to come under federal regulation for the first time without a battle.

The influence of the Caucus, its leading congresswomen, and their allied women's groups came from their claim to speak for women and in their interest. The insurance industry, therefore, poured its considerable resources into undermining that claim. It was a "no holds barred...vicious" confrontation with disappointing results for the women's rights coalition.

The tactics that worked for the pensions and child support bills were not used on insurance. There were no people at the hearings who had actually been harmed by current practice. "That's the thing that moves people." The bill had a better chance of approval in the Senate, but women group lobbyists went ahead with a House Committee mark-up knowing "they had a bad vote." They "wanted to get it over with" and were determined to "get people on record" for or against them. For reasons of party and chamber rivalry, "the House could not have done less than the Senate, not on a civil rights, women's equity issue." But it takes time to find victims and patience to play one chamber against the other. The gender gap was a hindrance when it caused advocates to be over-eager or over-confident.

## Conclusion

The gender gap enabled the Caucus, the congresswomen, and women's groups to capture the political limelight for a time. There was competition between the political parties, the houses of Congress, the congressional committees, the branches of government and between individual politicians vying for credit with women voters. At times, the Caucus, its allies and the issues they supported benefited and at other times tensions surfaced which threatened them all. Efforts to capitalize quickly on the political climate created by the gender gap took a toll. Nevertheless, significant victories were won.

Prior to the gender gap furor, being identified with women's issues had most often been considered disadvantageous for women in politics.<sup>9</sup> The staff aide of one of the Republicans who supports ERA but does not belong to the Caucus explained that her congresswoman had "always been one of the boys" and "hates the term 'women's issues.'" She does not want to be perceived as different. The legislative director for a congresswomen who is active in the Caucus disagreed. "For a woman," she said, "it makes a hell of a lot of sense to belong" to the Caucus for Women's Issues. "Since there are scores of caucuses up here," the charge that it "types you" is "unfair." Another aide to a congresswomen active in the Caucus explained that avoiding women's issues would really make no difference. "When you are a woman everything becomes a woman's issue, because you are always treated

## Commonwealth

as a woman” by colleagues and constituents alike. Pretending not to be different is absurd.

The gender gap, however, seemed to suddenly make women’s issues politically advantageous for women and for men. Instead of fearing the “Bella Abzug image” of radical feminist, congresswomen could expect leadership on women’s economic equity issues to bring them favorable publicity, electoral support, and the courting of their male colleagues. The gender gap had turned a potential inability into an asset.

In comparison with 10 years earlier, the women’s rights lobby was more experienced and better able to participate with their legislative allies in developing and refining bills to promote economic equity. In 1974, women’s groups would argue that public opinion polls supported their position, but they could not point to a direct electoral benefit that would accrue to their supporters. By 1984, they were perceived as having both strong arguments about equality and also votes to deliver. Perhaps their most serious mistake was in misjudging the gender gap.

The pension bill might well have included earlier vesting, portability and limits on integration with Social Security, at least initially. These more ambitious reforms were talked about but only for the next bill, as if the media would keep up the gender gap fervor indefinitely. On the other hand, in the fight over the insurance bill, the women’s rights lobby overestimated the political power of the gender gap. They were out-spent and out-maneuvered after internal conflict prevented them from seizing their one chance for a bill. It seems that Anne Costain was overly optimistic when she concluded that, “continued experience in working together will force women’s groups to develop routinized procedures for handling disagreement or dissolve cooperative efforts entirely” (1979, p. 105).

In May 1983, the National Organization for Women refused a compromise which might well have brought part of the insurance industry into their camp and the moderate women’s groups never forgave them. NOW was “absolutely closed minded,” “walking disasters” and “obstacles, truly obstacles.” The women’s rights lobby worked very hard for the bill, but most knew it was a futile effort after the insurance industry formed a united front. “We should have moved it right out...I was just outraged.” When NOW finally agreed to compromise, it was too late and the bitterness remained just below the surface. There was suspicion that NOW wanted a fundraising tool more than a bill, which intensified the underlying competition over who could really speak for women and deliver the gender gap vote.

At the same time it does seem that the women's right's lobby, with its supporters in the Caucus and in the Leadership Conference, had gained credibility in Congress. Even now, with the gender gap long absent from the front pages and the federal deficit inhibiting new spending proposals, some gains remain. The congresswomen and the women's rights lobbyists gained valuable experience, media exposure and allies on the Hill. Although Caucus membership has dropped from its high of 132 to 107 since congressional staff allotments were cut, a new version of the EEA was introduced in the 99th and again in the 100th Congress. And a proposal for family and medical leave for all workers will be before the full House Education and Labor and Post Office and Civil Service Committees in 1987 (*Update*, 1987, p. 14). The bill was developed by the Caucus and interest group representatives and is sponsored by the relevant subcommittee chairs. It is being taken seriously by the media and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. "The issue once relegated to the women's pages if noted at all by the national news media, is now a hot topic, debated seriously in the pages of business publications and national news magazines" (*New York Times*, 1987).

## NOTES

\*The author wishes to thank the American Association for University Women Educational Foundation for partial funding of this research.

1. This count was obtained by reviewing the *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature*. Although related, stories about Geraldine Ferraro's nomination to the vice presidency were not included. In the peak year, *Newsweek* and *Time* each had three gender gap stories and *U.S. News* ran four. Of course, *Ms* and *Working Woman* ran stories on the gender gap, but so did *People Weekly*, *Glamour*, *Vogue*, *Mademoiselle*, *Fortune*, *National Review*, *Rolling Stone*, *Psychology Today*, and more.
2. For an account of NOW's campaign to put a woman on the Democratic ticket, see Frankovic (1985).
3. The lobby emerged out of the drive to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in Congress in 1972. This coalition consists of traditional women's groups like the American Association of University Women and newer feminist groups like the National Organization for Women. Other participants include the Business and Professional Women's

## Commonwealth

- Clubs, the Women's Equity Action League, the National Women's Political Caucus, groups with interest in only one area such as women's health or child welfare, and staff organizations which can provide information but not lobby directly.
4. In an effort to develop a better perspective on Congress and reduce the bias inevitable in research of this type, the researcher participated in the APSA Congressional Fellows Program in 1985-86.
  5. Conservative congresswomen in both parties, such as Virginia Smith (R-NE) and Marily Lloyd (D-TN), have never supported the Caucus but several were nominal members for a period prior to the expansion. See Gertzog (1984, p. 209).
  6. This observation is based upon the author's experience working with the Caucus on the EEA. For a more detailed description of the development of this legislative package, see Gelb & Palley (1987, p. 183).
  7. The author attended meetings of this coalition during the summer of 1983 at the LCCR. Also see Gelb & Palley (1987, p. 183).
  8. The six were Olympia Snowe (ME), Claudine Schneider (RI), and Nancy Johnson (CT), members of the Caucus, and non-members Bobbi Fiedler (CA), Lynn Martin (IL), and Marge Roukema (NJ). All are supporters of the ERA.
  9. Jeane J. Kirkpatrick (1974, p. 124) reported that during interviews, "Half a dozen legislators volunteered comments that becoming active on a 'woman's' issue such as the Equal Rights Amendment introduced a strain into their otherwise excellent relations with male colleagues."

## REFERENCES

- BAXTER, Sandra and Marjorie Lansing. (1983) *Women and Politics: The Visible Majority*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.
- CONGRESSIONAL QUARTERLY ALMANAC. (1983, 1984).
- COSTAIN, Anne N. (1979) "Lobbying for Equal Credit," in Cummings and Schuck (eds): 82-110.
- CUMMINGS, Bernice and Victoria Schuck (eds.). (1979) *Women Organizing*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow.
- FRANKOVIC, Kathleen A. (1985) "The Ferraro Factor: The Women's Movement, the Polls and the Press," unpublished paper.



- GELB, Joyce and Marian Lief Palley. (1987) *Women and Public Policies*. Princeton: Princeton University.
- GERTZOG, Irwin N. (1984) *Congressional Women: Their Recruitment, Treatment, and Behavior*. New York: Praeger.
- KIRKPATRICK, Jean J. (1974) *Political Woman*. New York: Basic Books.
- NEW YORK TIMES. (1982a) "Male Female Split on Politics Found Decisive in Some Polls." October 27.
- \_\_\_\_ (1982b) "Warning on 'Gender Gap' from White House." December 3.
- \_\_\_\_ (1987) "Momentum and 'Family Leave.'" February 3.
- PERKINS, Jerry and Diane L. Fowlkes. (1980) "Opinion Representation versus Social Representation; or, Why Women Can't Run as Women and Win." *American Political Science Review*, 74: 92-103.
- UPDATE. (1987) Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues. May 29.
- VAN DYKE, Joyce. (1984) "WG Special Report on Women in American Society." The House Wednesday Group, June 21.