

# Women in Legislative Studies: Improving Gender Equality

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## ABSTRACT


Representation of women in the field of legislative politics is remarkably small and the absence of women has wide-ranging ramifications. In Fall 2019, we surveyed 361 women that we identified as studying legislative politics within political science to understand why women's representation in legislative studies is so low and what we can do about it. We found that many women study legislatures, but they do not always identify as scholars of legislative studies, often do not join the Legislative Studies Section, and tend to prioritize other journals over *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, the official journal of the section. In this article, we discuss several solutions to the problem of women's underrepresentation in legislative studies, including the new Women in Legislative Studies initiative.


Representation of women in the field of legislative politics is remarkably small. The overall percentage of political scientists that are women was recently reported to be 31% (Teele and Thelen 2017). Yet, the percentage of the American Political Science Association's (APSA) Legislative Studies Section (LSS) that is female is only 22%, the third lowest of 43 APSA sections and only slightly higher than the Political Methodology (21%) and the Presidents and Executive Politics (also 22%) sections (Roberts 2018). *Legislative Studies Quarterly* (LSQ), the journal associated with the LSS, had 26% women authors across 11 issues from 2016 through August 2018. In those 11 issues, LSQ published 73 articles, 59% of which were authored by men, 18% by women, and 23% by mixed-gender teams.<sup>1</sup>


The absence of women studying legislatures has wide-ranging ramifications. It indicates low gender equity/descriptive representation for women in the subfield, which is particularly notable at a time when many subfields are working to increase gender equality (Barnes and Beaulieu 2017; Beaulieu et al. 2017; Bos and Schneider 2012; Dion 2014; Mershon and Walsh 2015; Teele and Thelen

2017). This means that there are fewer women mentors to encourage young scholars to study legislatures and, because few women who are studying legislatures are in top-ranked departments, it precludes women mentoring where a larger proportion of PhDs are trained (Bos and Schneider 2012; Hesli, Lee, and Mitchell 2012). The small number of women in legislative studies portends limited networking opportunities for women, which studies have found are critically important to retaining women in academia and to the advancement of their careers (Stamm 2010). This also results in fewer scholarly resources to draw on when seeking section leadership, conference organizers, panelists, journal editors, and editorial boards (Stegmaier, Palmer, and van Assendelft 2011) as well as fewer women letter writers for promotion and tenure. The low representation of women also reinforces gender bias in the authorship of research, graduate training (Hardt et al. 2019; Smith et al. 2020), publication rates (Breuning and Sanders 2007; Teele and Thelen 2017), and citations for women in the field (Dion, Sumner, and Mitchell 2018). This is especially important when we consider that “female authors are significantly more likely than male authors to cite studies by female authors and that mixed-gender teams have statistically similar but slightly higher odds of citing studies by women compared to male-author teams” (Dion, Sumner, and Mitchell 2018, 313).

Why is women's representation in legislative studies so low and what can we do about it?<sup>2</sup> In this article, we argue that one reason for the low representation may be that women under-identify as

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legislative scholars and do not perceive the field as inclusive. We present results of a survey conducted in Fall 2019 that support this explanation. We find that many women study legislatures but that they do not always identify as scholars of legislative studies; they often do not join the LSS; and they tend to prioritize other journals over *LSQ*, the official journal of the section.

To address the problem of women's low representation, the Women in Legislative Studies (WiLS) initiative was created.<sup>3</sup> It builds on the work of similar initiatives in the discipline—such as Women in Conflict Studies, Visions in Methodology, and the

Science Association 2017, 2018; American Political Science Association 2017, 2018; Political Methodology 2017, 2018). Second, we identified women scholars from WomenAlsoKnowStuff ([www.womenalsoknowstuff.com](http://www.womenalsoknowstuff.com)) who listed “legislatures,” “congress,” and “parliament” in their profile. Third, we identified women scholars who had published in *LSQ* in the past five years. These steps resulted in a population of 361 women studying topics related to legislative politics. We then sent all of those scholars an email invitation (and two follow-up reminder emails) to complete an online Qualtrics survey. This yielded a sample of

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mentoring conferences for women studying political psychology and women of color—and it aims to engage, support, and promote women who study legislative politics. The WiLS initiative broadly defines legislative politics to include research on legislatures, legislators, legislative elections, legislative representation, and relationships between legislatures and other branches of government. WiLS embraces diversity of legislative scholars and scholarship, and it focuses on scholars who are studying a wide variety of law-making bodies—the US Congress, US state legislatures, comparative legislatures at the national and subnational levels, and international legislatures. The initiative especially emphasizes collaborative and peer mentoring by hosting professional development workshops, research seminars, writing groups, a website, a listserv, a Twitter feed, and annual conferences. The goals are to provide an environment that is conducive to collaborative networking, mentoring, professional development, and research opportunities for women who are studying legislatures broadly defined. The initiative also promotes women who are studying legislatures and their research.

#### THE SURVEY

We conducted a survey of women who study legislative politics to understand why so few women join and participate in the LSS. We

187 respondents and a response rate of 51.8% (Powell, Schwindt-Bayer, and Sin 2023).

We asked for a limited amount of demographic information because we were surveying a narrow population—women with or aspiring to a PhD. Education, occupation, and wealth are near constant. As shown in table 1, our sample is composed of slightly more than half American politics scholars and slightly less than half comparative politics scholars.<sup>4</sup> There was a small number of respondents who identified as studying international relations, methodology, and political philosophy as their primary field. Respondents were 76% white/non-Hispanic, 9% Latino/Hispanic, 2% Asian American, and 2% African American. There was similar representation across the academic ranks of assistant, associate, and full professors, as well as a small representation of graduate students and postdocs (mostly due to how we identified the population, as described previously).

#### FINDINGS: WOMEN STUDY LEGISLATURES BUT DO NOT IDENTIFY AS SCHOLARS OF LEGISLATIVE POLITICS

Many women study legislatures but they do not always identify as scholars of legislative studies. Of the women in our survey, 94% stated that they had done work on or related to the study of legislatures. However, far fewer identified as scholars of legislative

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took three steps to identify our population of women who study legislative politics. First, we conducted a search for women who presented conference papers related to legislative politics via a keyword search for the terms “legislatures,” “congress,” and “parliament” in recent conference programs (Midwest Political

studies. As shown in table 2, 62% stated that they definitely or probably would consider themselves to be someone who studies legislatures; 30% stated probably or definitely not. Only 36% stated that they were definitely someone who studies legislatures. This contrasts sharply with the 94% of women who had done work on

Table 1

### Respondents by Academic Rank, Subfield, and Race/Ethnicity

Academic Rank	%	Subfield	%	Race	%
Assistant Professor	28%	American	54%	White, non-Hispanic	76%
Associate Professor	27%	Comparative	45%	Hispanic/Latino	9%
Full/Emeritus Professor	22%	International Relations	2%	No Response	7%
Graduate Student/Postdoc	11%	Political Philosophy	1%	Other	4%
Adjunct/Instructor/Other	6%	Political Methodology	7%	Asian American	2%
No Response	5%	No Response	3%	African American/Black	2%
Number of Observations	187	Number of Observations	187	Number of Observations	187

Table 2

### Do You Consider Yourself Someone Who Studies Legislatures?

	%
Definitely Yes	36%
Probably Yes	26%
Not Sure	7%
Probably Not	26%
Definitely Not	4%
N	185

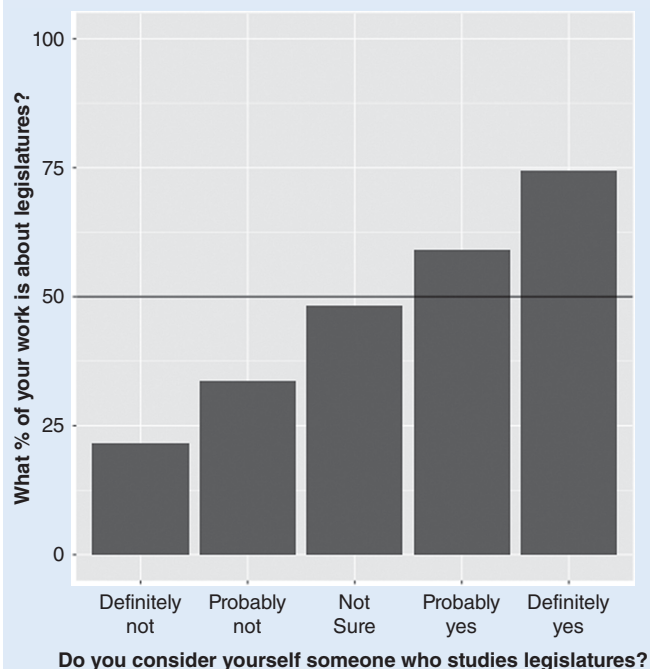
legislatures and our identification of all of them as studying legislatures.

Further reviewing this divergence, we asked scholars what percentage of their work is focused on legislatures; figure 1 shows that this correlated with a respondent's identification as a legislative politics scholar. Those women who stated that they were not sure, probably not, and definitely not legislative politics scholars were those with less than 50% of their work focused on legislatures. We asked these women in an open-ended question why they felt that way. Responses were varied, but many of the answers nevertheless were associated with legislative politics. Some respondents stated that they study "...political representation in general" and "I study executive-legislative interactions" and "I think of myself as someone who studies women's representation." Other respondents spoke of legislatures but more as a vehicle to their work on something else; for example, "Legislative bodies are simply one venue for studying women's representation" and "I am interested in Congress but consider myself more a gender person who looks at legislatures and legislative elections." Interpretations of what "legislative studies" means were clearly varied, which may partially influence whether someone identifies as studying legislative politics. As one respondent noted, "I did not fully realize until taking this survey how much of my research is on legislatures, and yet I do not consider myself a legislative scholar. Instead, I label myself a scholar of [topic w], [topic x], [topic y], and [topic z]. But much of my research does involve legislative politics."

Two popular metrics that demonstrate women's underrepresentation in legislative studies are their membership in the LSS and their publishing in *LSQ*. Our survey asked respondents about their LSS membership and *LSQ* experiences. Table 3 lists the

Figure 1

### How Respondents Describe the Proportion of Their Work Related to Legislatures by How They Self-Identify as Legislative Scholars



percentage of the women sampled who were LSS members and had submitted studies to *LSQ*. We found that only 39% of the respondents (whom we identified as studying legislatures) were LSS members and 61% were not. Less than half of the sampled women who study legislatures had joined the LSS. Slightly more than half (54%) of respondents had ever submitted work to *LSQ*, and only 9% stated that *LSQ* typically is the first journal to which they consider sending their work. More popular journals were *Journal of Politics (JOP)*, other subfield journals, *American Journal of Political Science (AJPS)*, and *American Political Science Review (APSR)*. These results show that women are not strongly identifying with, involved in, or using the structures that support scholars who are studying legislatures—that is, the section and the main journal of the subfield.

**Table 3**  
LSS Membership, LSQ Submissions, and Journal Preferences

LSS Membership	%	Submitted to LSQ	%	First-Preference Journal	%
Non-LSS Member	61%	Yes	54%	JOP	47%
LSS Member	39%	No	44%	Other	41%
N	187	Do Not Recall	2%	AJPS	38%
		N	181	APSR	26%
				LSQ	9%
				N	164

**Table 4**  
The APSA Sections That Non-LSS Members Join

Section	%
16. Women and Politics Research	28%
8. Representation and Electoral Systems	17%
20. Comparative Politics	16%
32. Elections, Public Opinion, and Voting Behavior	16%
5. Political Organizations and Parties	15%
22. State Politics and Policy	13%
33. Race, Ethnicity, and Politics	10%
42. Experimental Research	7%
1. Federalism and Intergovernmental Relations	6%
35. Comparative Democratization	6%
4. Public Policy	5%
Number of Observations	114

Note: Sections with less than 5% are omitted from the table.

Table 4 shows that women who did not join the LSS often join other sections instead. Almost half are in related sections, including Women and Politics Research, Representation and Electoral Systems, and Comparative Politics. Many join Elections, Public Opinion, and Voting Behavior; Political Organizations and Parties; and State Politics and Policy. Race and Ethnic Politics was another popular section for non-LSS members. All of these other sections overlap with legislative studies. Yet, women are joining those sections rather than the LSS.<sup>5</sup>

**FINDINGS: WHY ARE WOMEN NOT JOINING THE LEGISLATIVE STUDIES SECTION?**

To understand why women are not joining the LSS, we asked the question directly. Table 5 reports the most common reasons given for not joining the LSS. The responses in the table total more than 100% because we asked women to select all of the reasons that applied to them. The main reason (selected by 50% of respondents) was that they never considered joining. It is not clear if those respondents did not know about the section or simply did not think it was a fit for them, but they reported that they never considered the section. An additional 18% of respondents stated that they did not join because they do not identify as a legislative politics scholar.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond never considering joining and not identifying as a legislative scholar, several respondents noted exclusion-related

**Table 5**  
Why Women Do Not Join the LSS

%	Response
50%	Never considered joining
21%	Too focused on the US Congress
18%	I do not consider myself a legislative scholar
17%	Section membership is not important to me
15%	Other
12%	Too expensive
12%	Perceived to be male dominated
10%	No additional benefits
8%	Too cliquy/exclusive
7%	Not a welcoming section
7%	Too heavily focused on quantitative methods
6%	Lacks racial and ethnic diversity
106	Number of Observations

concerns—the section being perceived as too male-dominated (12%), too exclusive (8%), not welcoming (7%), not methodologically diverse (7%), and not racially and ethnically diverse (6%).<sup>7</sup> Other reasons selected were the LSS is too focused on the US Congress (21%) and section membership was not viewed as being important (17%).

Belonging and community were important to the women that we sampled. One respondent noted “[I] see my primary field as REP because that is where I have always felt the most comfortable.” Another stated that “while I was in graduate school and the first few years of my TT job, I did think of myself as a comparative legislatures’ scholar. But it was hard to find a community to engage with....Eventually, I started working on projects on gender, and the feel of that community was completely different. Very welcoming and prosocial.” Improving perceptions of inclusivity in legislative studies is key for diversifying the field.

Moreover, the exclusion-related concerns that respondents raised about why they have not joined the LSS were echoed by respondents (both LSS members and nonmembers) when we asked about what problems that they perceive with the LSS. Table 6 lists common concerns that the respondents raised about the section.<sup>8</sup> The most common critique was the perception that the section is male-dominated (37%); however, many respondents also raised concerns about cliquishness and exclusivity (28%), the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the section (21%), and that it

Table 6

### Problems That Women Perceive with the LSS

%	Response
37%	Perceived to be male dominated
28%	Too cliquy/exclusive
28%	Too focused on the US Congress
21%	Lacks racial and ethnic diversity
15%	Not a welcoming section
15%	Too heavily focused on quantitative methods
8%	Too expensive
8%	Other
5%	No additional benefits
164	Number of Respondents Who Answered This Question

was not a welcoming section (15%). These findings of women's concerns about exclusivity and unwelcomeness in male-dominated environments are consistent with previous studies in political science (American Political Science Association 2004, 2022; Claypool and Mershon 2016; Hesli and Burrell 1995; Kinsella and Sanchez 2023; Michelson and Montforti 2021).

The only other critiques that garnered more than 10% support were concerns that the LSS was too focused on the US Congress as well as quantitative methods.

#### SOLUTIONS

Women are underrepresented in legislative studies. What can be done about it? We identify several strategies for building a legislative studies community more welcoming to women. First, we think it is important to conceive "legislative studies" in a broader sense than simply internal legislative processes to involve more and diverse scholars. Legislative studies often has been associated strictly with the US Congress and what happens *inside* of Congress, but the field of legislative studies is much broader than that. It includes US state legislatures, legislatures at all levels in other countries, and international legislative bodies. It is not only about how politics occurs inside legislatures but also how people are elected to legislatures and how legislatures interact with other political entities (e.g., executives, bureaucracies, and interest groups). Legislative studies

objectives of building collaborative mentoring environments, constructing professional identity, and increasing retention rates (American Political Science Association 2004, 2011, 2022; Bos and Schneider 2012; Briscoe-Palmer and Mattocks 2021; Cassese and Holman 2018; Hesli, Fink, and Duffy 2003; Monroe 2003). One strategy emphasized in the literature is Collaborative Mentorship Networks (CMN).<sup>9</sup> Mentoring networks are substantially different from traditional departmental one-on-one, supervisory, senior-junior mentoring. Instead, CMN encourages reciprocal, collaborative work with each person making a unique contribution to the network in terms of research, professional stage, experiences, teaching, or other expertise. This type of networking is especially important for the career progression of women and underrepresented minorities (American Political Science Association 2022; Bennion 2004; Cassese and Holman 2018; Kinsella and Sanchez 2023; Lavariega Monforti and Michelson 2008, 2020; Michelson and Lavariega Monforti 2021; Michelson and Wilkinson 2023; Sinclair-Chapman 2015; Yanow 2020). In the April 2023 *PS: Political Science & Politics* Symposium on Equity in Political Science, Simien and Wallace (2023) recommend more opportunities for peer mentoring, arguing that they "provide vitally important information and offer influential professional networks and mentoring relationships that are crucial to scholars....Although they can result in segregated social and professional networks, women academics and faculty of color who are invited speakers and panelists as well as participants attest to the fact that women and people of color belong in academe." Writing groups composed of peer mentors who encourage research productivity comprise one form of CMN. For example, Cassese and Holman (2018, 401) argued that "peer mentoring...can fill some of the gaps that traditional mentoring leaves for female faculty and bolster the pipeline for women in the profession."

The WiLS initiative was created precisely to encourage peer mentoring. It hosts a monthly online professional development seminar on topics including strategies for women on the job market; how to publish; balancing teaching, research, and service; engaging with social media; and fighting the midcareer blues. It runs a monthly research seminar online where women scholars of all ranks can present their work in progress. A writing group meets monthly to help scholars schedule research time, get writing done, and interact with other women conducting legislative studies research. The initiative held its first annual in-person conference for women studying legislatures in October 2022, which included opportunities for sharing research, networking, and professional development. With these efforts, the WiLS initiative can facilitate

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is not only about homogenously studying elites, implicitly assuming that they are all men from the majority race/ethnicity in a society, but rather recognizing the social diversity among individuals running for and winning legislative offices. If we can reconceptualize legislative studies in this way, we open the door to many scholars who believe that their work on legislatures is not part of "legislative studies."

A second strategy to improve this underrepresentation is to create a network for women working on legislative studies, with the

peer mentoring among women doing research on legislatures, help women build legislative studies networks, and improve their career experiences.

A third strategy is to work with the LSS to address some of the concerns raised by the women we surveyed. The WiLS initiative is working with others in the section to create an inclusive environment for diverse scholars. The LSS already is representing women and minorities in leadership positions and trying to represent diversity better in conference organizing and on panels. The LSS

newsletter recently has been highlighting diverse topics and should continue doing so. The LSS could expand its efforts and find other ways to increase diversity in section membership. For example, the structure of the annual business meeting and reception could be redesigned to be more welcoming to new participants. Poster sessions could be incorporated into the meeting and reception, short presentations from award winners could replace prewritten descriptions of papers by committees, and announcements from those on the job market and those hiring could facilitate conversations and networking.

The LSS also could organize an annual legislative studies conference that broadly focuses on legislative studies topics and encourages participation from diverse scholars across ranks and institutions. The section could build a more active listserv for members and greater interaction with other APSA sections that often also include scholars studying legislatures (e.g., Women and Politics Research, Race and Ethnic Politics, and Representation and Electoral Systems). These sections could cosponsor panels, organize smaller workshops, coordinate on newsletters, and advertise one another's events on listservs, thereby diversifying several sections at once. The professional development and research seminars that WiLS hosts could be adopted by the LSS for a more diverse audience. Mentoring workshops and relationships could be facilitated by the section for the benefit of all. Many options are available for improving diversity in legislative studies and making the subfield more inclusive for newcomers.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, representation of women in the field of legislative studies is remarkably low. Many women study legislatures but do not see themselves as legislative scholars, do not find the LSS particularly welcoming to them, and tend to seek other publishing outlets. This has numerous negative repercussions for women, the subfield, and the organizations that represent the field (i.e., the LSS and *LSQ*). However, it is a problem that can be solved. One part of the solution may be the peer mentoring facilitated by the WiLS initiative. Other solutions include explicitly broadening the definition of "legislative studies" and efforts within the LSS to better incorporate women (and minorities) into the subfield. The goal is to increase women's representation in legislative studies such that it becomes more representative of the discipline itself and women are more fully integrated into the subfield.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics*

Harvard Dataverse at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/FZOVRC>. The editors have granted an exception to the data policy for this manuscript. In this case, replication data are not available on Dataverse for the variables used to produce Table 1. This exception was granted because those variables are demographic characteristics that could make our respondents identifiable in this small elite sample.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

## NOTES

1. It is important to note that these percentages are proportional to women's submission rates in *LSQ*. Regardless, they are small. Note that the LSS already is working to get more women into section leadership and committee positions, and *LSQ* boasted an editorial board that was 40% women (as of 2021).
2. Representation of minorities in legislative studies is even more unbalanced than that for gender. We focused this project on women, but similar problems and questions exist for underrepresented minorities. An initiative called New Perspectives in Studies of American Governance, a collaboration between American University and Purdue University and funded by the Hewlett Foundation, focuses on minorities studying legislatures.
3. WiLS was created from a conversation at a MPSA conference dinner where the authors of this article met for the first time and lamented the minimal representation of women in the subfield. We thought we could do something about it and wrote a short proposal to conduct a survey, host a social hour at the APSA Annual Meeting, and host a research workshop/hackathon. We shared it with the LSS, *LSQ*, and APSA and received initial funding from those organizations along with a National Science Foundation (NSF) workshop grant. The COVID pandemic interfered with the research workshop, but we held the hackathon online in Fall 2020 with 25 women in the field of legislative studies. The myriad activities that WiLS currently hosts, as well as its volunteers, resulted from that event.
4. The editors have granted an exception to the data policy for this manuscript. In this case, replication data are not available on Dataverse for the variables used to produce Table 1. This exception was granted because those variables are demographic characteristics that could make our respondents identifiable in this small elite sample.
5. Note that scholars can and often do join multiple APSA sections. However, each section has a fee to join, and many scholars do not have university resources to join as many sections as they might like. What remains clear, however, is that the LSS is not a priority for many women scholars.
6. Somewhat surprisingly, there was practically no overlap between respondents who stated that they had never considered joining the section and those who did not identify as legislative studies scholars. We suspect that this may be an artifact of the sequence of response options because "never considered joining" was the first response option and "not identifying as a legislative scholar" was the 11th response option.
7. Note that respondents could select multiple response options to this question; therefore, the percentages listed in table 5 cannot simply be totaled.
8. Respondents were able to select multiple responses to this question; thus, the percentages listed do not total 100%. Furthermore, it is worth noting that some respondents did not specify any problems with the LSS.
9. A good example is the NSF-funded Advance Project at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst on mutual mentoring.

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