Essential Work is Gender Segregated; This Shapes the Gendered Representation of Essential Workers in Political Office

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Tiffany D. Barnes  
Associate Professor  
University of Kentucky

Mirya Holman  
Associate Professor  
Tulane University

Abstract

*Objective:* Understand how gender structures the occupations of essential workers and which essential workers serve in political office.  

*Methods:* We first use population level data by gender and occupation to examine the gender segregation of occupations deemed essential. Using the population composition as our baseline, we then examine descriptive representation using a new dataset that codes the presence of essential workers in 30 state legislatures over 15 years.  

*Results:* We show that men and women make up similar shares of the occupations considered essential during COVID, but the occupations that they hold are highly gendered segregated. We find that women essential workers and those from women-dominated occupations are dramatically underrepresented in state legislatures.  

*Conclusion:* Documenting the (lack of) representation of essential workers, and particularly those from women-dominated occupations, in decision making bodies is a critical first step to understanding policymaking in response to COVID-19.

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Introduction

The medical and economic effects of COVID-19 are not neutral across gender and occupations. Indeed, although large shares of men and women continue to work in occupations deemed essential during the pandemic, the jobs held by essential workers are highly gender segregated, with consequences for policy needs. For example, those working in health care support (85% women) and construction (only 4% women) face very different workplace realities during a pandemic. As governments grasp for policy solutions to COVID-19, the persistent gendered segregation of essential occupations suggest disparate policy demands for men and women in these jobs.

State and local governments have produced most of the COVID-related policy. State legislatures have introduced more than 1500 bills in the first 100 days of response to the pandemic (NCSL 2020). Scholars of representation have long pointed to the importance of including descriptive representatives from marginalized groups in political office. Descriptive representatives’ “innovative thinking in contexts of uncrystallized, not fully articulated, interests” (Mansbridge 1999, 628) may be particularly important to address rapidly shifting policy demands in the midst of a crisis. Yet, we know little about whether representatives with experience in essential occupations are present in policymaking bodies. Drawing on these theories of descriptive representation, we investigate the gender distribution of essential workers in the population and compared this to representatives in state legislatures.

In this note, we examine the jobs held by men and women considered essential workers and compare this to the occupations of men and women in state legislative office. The representation of men with essential occupation backgrounds in legislative office approximates men essential workers in the labor force; 32% of the general population are men who work in essential occupations and 26% of state legislators are men who have a background in one of these
essential occupations. For women, the story is very different: whereas 26% of the workforce are women in essential jobs, only 6% of state legislators are women with experience in an essential occupation.

Motivated by research on gender role theory (Schneider and Bos 2019), which argues that men and women are socialized to fulfill certain roles in society, we next examine the gender-segregation of occupations of essential workers. We show that men and women do very different jobs as essential workers; indeed, many of the most highly gender segregated occupations are considered essential. As a result, men and women face very different policy problems as they engage in these essential jobs. A closer look at our data on legislators reveals that women-dominated essential occupations are particularly underrepresented in state legislatures. Assessing the (lack of) representation of women essential workers in decision making bodies is a critical first step to understanding the gendered nature of the policy-making process in response to COVID-19.

**Gender and the Occupations of Essential Workers: Population-Level Data**

We first identify which occupations are held by essential workers and the gendered patterns of these occupations. To do so, we combine the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) list of essential occupations with data on fulltime workers from the 2018 American Communities Survey (ACS). A note on the denominator: we use all full-time workers as the base population when talking about essential workers. Overall, more than half of all workers (men: 32% of all workers, women: 26% of all workers) have an occupation deemed essential by DHS. Understanding how to craft policy to protect and care for these workers is thus both important for a large segment of the population and for the recovery from COVID.

But it is not just whether men and women work in essential jobs at all, but there is also important variation in the type of industries that are deemed essential. These occupations socialize
people, shaping policy preferences and political engagement (Kitschelt and Rehm 2014). We know that occupations in the United States are often highly gender segregated, with little change over time (Levanon and Grusky 2016). Gender role socialization shapes these choices in careers, with women seeking out work that involves caring and interpersonal communication, while men sort into jobs that highlight leadership and independence.

**Figure 1: Gender, gender segregation, and essential occupations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>% Women</th>
<th>% Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All full-time workers</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All essential workers</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare support</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare practitioners</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal care &amp; service</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social services</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food prep &amp; serving</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales &amp; related</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning &amp; maintenance</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production &amp; transportation</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective service</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction &amp; maintenance</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We combine the DHS’s list of essential occupational categories with ACS data on gender and occupation to illustrate the gender segregation of these occupations in Figure 1. The top of the figure presents the overall gender breakdown of all full-time workers and all essential workers: women make up slightly less than half of both groups. Occupations (listed on the y-axis) are then ordered by share of women: the first four rows are women-dominated (60%+) occupations, the
middle two occupations are not gender segregated, and the final three rows are male-dominated (60%+) occupations. Women’s share of essential occupations ranges from 85% to 4%.

Consistent with gender role theory, the type of work that essential workers do varies by gender. Women are far more likely than men to hold jobs in caring occupations, including healthcare support, personal care and services, healthcare, and social services. Men, by contrast, are more likely to hold jobs that require physical strength or agentic skills like production and transportation, protective services, and construction and maintenance. While women and men both hold jobs deemed ‘front line’ (for example, women holding the majority of health care and health care support jobs and men making up the larger share of protective services), policy demands to support workers in these jobs might be similar or very different.

**Are Women Essential Workers Represented? State Legislative Data**

Elected officials tend to be white men from elite occupational backgrounds (Barnes and Holman 2019; Silva and Skulley 2019). Descriptive characteristics (including gender and occupation) of legislators have a profound influence on policy outcomes (Barnes, Beall, and Holman 2020; Osborn 2012). Given that many essential occupations are working class and that women do not hold political offices at levels of parity, we examine the presence of men and women with experience in essential occupations in political office.

To assess the level of representation, we develop a new dataset that codes the share of women and men legislators with essential worker backgrounds across 30 state legislatures from 2000-2014. We construct this dataset by hand-coding each job listed by a legislator (dataset from Hansen and Clark 2020) (for example, pediatric nurse) into a general occupational category that corresponds with the ACS population-level categories (so the pediatric nurse would be coded as a healthcare professional) in order to classify their occupational experience as “essential” or not.
Importantly, we code a legislator as having a background as an essential worker if they are reported in the data as having ever held an essential worker occupation. Thus, even if the legislator left the essential worker profession and went on to hold a position in a non-essential profession they are coded as having a background as an essential worker for our purposes. We examine both legislators over a 15-year period (more than 39,000 legislators) and the most recent year (2014; 3500+ legislators). We use all state legislators as the denominator for our descriptive statistics.

We benchmark essential workers’ representation in state legislators against the share of essential workers in the population. Men essential workers are well represented in state legislatures, but women are not. In the population, men and women essential workers each make up 32% and 26% of all workers. Among elites in 2014, 77% of seats were held by men and 29% of all legislators are men with a background in essential work. Women, by contrast, hold only 23% of state legislative seats, and only 7% of seats are held by women legislators with essential work backgrounds. Women essential workers are thus underrepresented in state legislatures.

Do state legislators’ occupational backgrounds also reflect the gender segregation that we noted within essential workers in the general population? For simplicity’s sake, we compare the share of legislators who have women-dominated, not gender segregated, and men-dominated essential occupations to the share of the citizens in these categories in the population (see Figure 2). As this comparison makes evident, the backgrounds of essential worker state legislators are also gender-segregated: men in state legislatures are more likely to have experience in men dominated occupations as women legislators are more likely to have women-dominated essential jobs.
Because women are underrepresented and men in office are less likely to have women dominated occupations, state legislatures do not have a representative group of legislators with women-dominated essential occupations, as compared to the population. Of all the legislators in our sample in 2014, only 4% are women with a background in women-dominated essential fields such as social services, healthcare support, healthcare and personal care, compared to 16% of the general population. Because men are overrepresented in the legislators, there are nearly double the number of men from these women-dominated occupations; yet, the share is still smaller than men in women-dominated jobs in the general population. As a result, people with experience in women
dominated essential worker occupations are practically excluded from the policy-making process. Instead, far more legislators come from male-dominated essential worker categories. Although only 1.5% are women from male-dominated occupations, 14% of legislators are men from these occupations. Given that 16% of women citizens and 9% of men work in women-dominated essential occupations, these perspectives and experiences are conspicuously missing from the policy-making process.

One concern may be whether or not data from 2014 reflect who is in office today. We examine the data over our 15-year period from 2000 to 2014: the share of essential workers remained relatively constant over time. In 2000, 7% of legislators are women with essential jobs and 27% of legislators are men, levels that are remarkably similar to the 7% and 26% in 2014. Essential workers do not appear to be gaining any ground in decision-making bodies. And even though our data ended a few years before the pandemic, we do not have any reason to believe that the rate is markedly different today. Although we would prefer to have data from 2020, data from Clark and Hansen is the best available data to provide insights into this pressing question. Collecting systematic biographical data for a number of legislative chambers is extremely demanding (Barnes and Holman 2019; Hansen and Clark 2020). For this reason, other research that leverages politicians’ occupational backgrounds typically limited to a very small number of chambers or to information on the politician’s most recent occupation.

**Conclusion and Implications**

Essential workers, particularly women and those in women-dominated fields, are underrepresented in legislative institutions. Documenting these patterns is an important first step to understanding whether and how essential workers’ needs and voices are represented via policymaking amidst a pandemic. Without descriptive data on who is in political office, it is
difficult to know whose voices are heard and who is absent. Our data reaffirms that “whereas men are universally represented in decision-making bodies around COVID-19, women are systematically underrepresented” (Childs and Palmieri 2020, 1) but it is not just gender. The gendered segregation of essential work and women’s underrepresentation combine to mean that we find very few representatives with experience in women-dominated essential occupations.

Understanding levels of representation (or lack thereof) provides opportunities to consider what kinds of policies are made. Policy responses to COVID in state legislatures reveal entrepreneurship by legislators with backgrounds in these essential occupations. In Hawaii, Representative Rida Cabanilla, a former nurse, sponsored a resolution allowing nursing home and home-health care employees access to rapid COVID tests. In California, Assemblyman Rodriguez, a former EMT, proposed requiring healthcare facilities to maintain a supply of PPE. And in the New Jersey Assembly, Carol Murphy, a former community relations officer, authored a bill allowing surviving dependents of frontline workers who die in the course of duty to receive funds.

Occupational experiences are formative for policymaker’s preferences, priorities, and policy outcomes. The presence of women legislators from pink-collar jobs like healthcare support and social services increases funding for healthcare and social services (Barnes, Beall, and Holman 2020). Legislators pursue policies that help those with which they share occupational or class backgrounds (O’Grady 2019). Veterans in Congress advocate on behalf of veteran constituents (Lowande, Ritchie, and Lauterbach 2019). We believe that the representation of essential workers is critically important for designing policies that best respond to the pressing issues surrounding COVID-19.

Not all policies to address the needs of essential workers are authored by essential workers. At the same time, while legislators can learn about the occupational and gendered effects of
COVID on their constituents and respond accordingly, the lack of on-the-ground knowledge of the occupational realities may prolong response time or limit quality policymaking. Legislators with first-hand experiences can be better positioned to recognize and respond. These ‘uncrystalized’ policy challenges demand an evaluation of the descriptive characteristics of those in political office.

Future research could engage in an evaluation of whether legislators with backgrounds in common with those on the front line of the COVID crisis and responses (including health care, health care support, essential employees, and educators) will be more likely to recognize the gendered effects of COVID and to prioritize policies that target these populations. As we move into elections, scholars should also consider whether voters are reevaluating who is qualified to make policy intended to address COVID and the diverse needs of the gender-segregated labor force.
Works Cited:


