

Essential Work Is Gender Segregated: This Shapes the Gendered Representation of Essential Workers in Political Office

Tiffany D. Barnes , *University of Kentucky*

Mirya R. Holman , *Tulane University*

Objective. To 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 data set 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 gender 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 policy making in response to COVID-19.

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 percent women) and construction (only 4 percent 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 suggests disparate policy demands for men and women in these jobs.

State and local governments have produced most COVID-related policy. State legislatures have introduced more than 1,500 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 the degree to which representatives with experience in essential occupations are present in policy-making bodies. Drawing on these theories of descriptive representation, we investigate the gender distribution of essential workers in the population and compare this to representatives in state legislatures.

Direct correspondence to Mirya R. Holman, Tulane University, 6823 St. Charles Ave., Norman Mayer Bldg., Rm. 316, New Orleans, LA 70118 (mholman@tulane.edu). Thanks to Eric Hansen and Chris Clark for generously sharing their data on legislative occupations with us.

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In this note, we examine the jobs held by men and women considered essential workers and compare these 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 percent of the general population are men who work in essential occupations and 26 percent of state legislators are men who have a background in one of these essential occupations. For women, the story is very different: although 26 percent of the workforce are women in essential jobs, only 6 percent 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

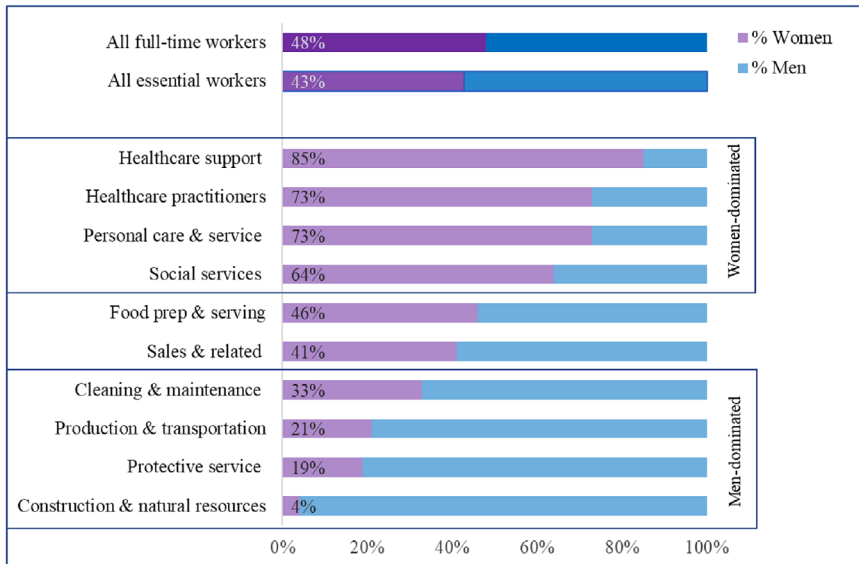
We first identify which occupations are held by essential workers and the gendered patterns of these occupations. To do so, we combine the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) list of essential occupations with data on full-time workers from the 2018 American Communities Survey (ACS). A note on the 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 percent of all workers, women: 26 percent 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, 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.

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 percent+) occupations, the middle two occupations are not gender segregated, and the final three rows are male-dominated (60 percent+) occupations. Women's share of essential occupations ranges from 85 to 4 percent.

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

FIGURE 1
Gender, Gender Segregation, and Essential Occupations



NOTE: Data from the American Communities Survey, 2018. Only includes full-time workers.

health-care support, personal care, 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” (e.g., women holding the majority of healthcare 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.

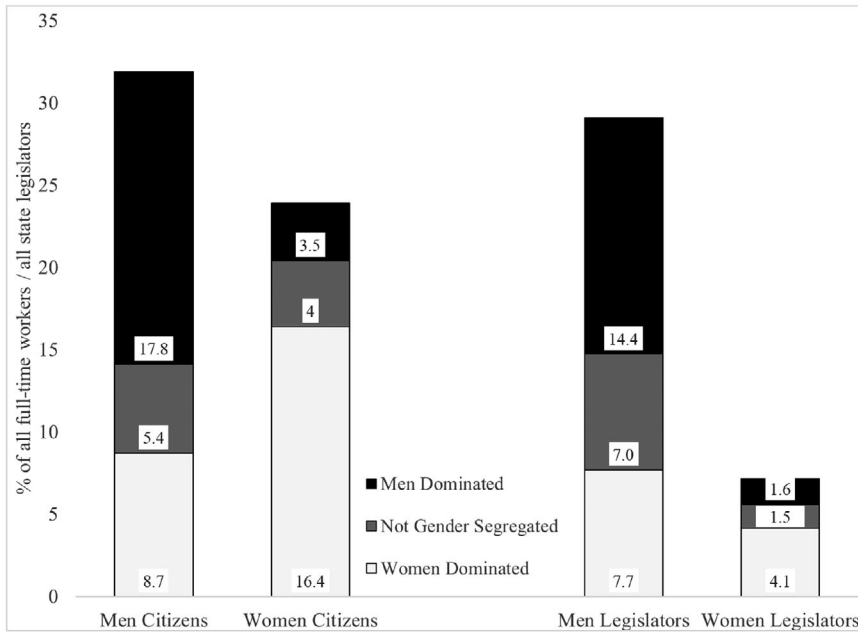
Are Women Essential Workers Represented? State Legislative Data

Elected officials tend to be white men from elite occupational backgrounds (Barnes and Holman, 2020; 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 data set that codes the share of women and men legislators with essential worker backgrounds across 30 state legislatures from 2000 to 2014. We construct this data set by hand-coding each job listed by a legislator (data set from Hansen and Clark, 2020) (e.g., pediatric nurse) into a general occupational category that corresponds with the ACS population-level categories (so the pediatric nurse would be coded as a health-care 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 he or she is reported in the data as having ever

FIGURE 2

Gender Segregation of Occupations, Population, and State Legislators



NOTE: Data from 2014. Men hold 77 percent of state legislative seats (48 percent without essential work backgrounds and 29 percent with essential work backgrounds) and women hold 23 percent of seats (16 percent without essential work backgrounds and 7 percent with essential work backgrounds).

held an essential worker occupation. Thus, even if the legislator left the essential worker profession and went on to hold a position in a nonessential profession, he or she is coded as having a background as an essential worker for our purposes. We examine legislators both 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 legislatures 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 percent and 26 percent of all workers. Among elites in 2014, 77 percent of seats were held by men and 29 percent of all legislators are men with a background in essential work. Women, by contrast, hold only 23 percent of state legislative seats, and only 7 percent 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 and 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 percent are women with a background in women-dominated essential fields such as social services, health-care support, healthcare, and personal care, compared to 16 percent of the general population. Because men are overrepresented in the legislatures, 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 percent are women from male-dominated occupations, 14 percent of legislators are men from these occupations. Given that 16 percent of women citizens and 9 percent 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 percent of legislators are women with essential jobs and 27 percent of legislators are men, levels that are remarkably similar to the 7 percent and 26 percent in 2014. Essential workers do not appear to gain 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 are 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, 2020; Hansen and Clark, 2020). For this reason, other research that leverages politicians' occupational backgrounds is 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 policy making 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 reaffirm 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 health-care 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 policymakers' preferences, priorities, and policy outcomes. The presence of women legislators from pink-collar jobs like health-care support and social services increases funding for healthcare and social services (Barnes, Beall, and Holman, 2020). Legislators pursue policies that help those with whom 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 policy making. Legislators with first-hand experiences can be better positioned to recognize and respond. These "uncrystallized" 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 frontline of the COVID crisis and responses (including healthcare, 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.

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