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**GENDER AND THE CHANGING CHARACTER
OF THE
WASHINGTON STATE LEGISLATURE**

MEGAN S. FARR

HONORS PROGRAM SENIOR PROJECT

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HONORS THESIS

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I. INTRODUCTION

The study of women in politics is a relatively new field. Western political thought, starting in ancient Greece, has with only a few rare exceptions entertained the idea of a political life wherein women participate equally with men if at all (Darcy, Welch, Clark, p. 2-3). Women were expressly left out in the framing of the United States Constitution. In a letter responding to his wife's plea to "remember the ladies" in framing the Constitution, John Adams wrote, "Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. . . We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would completely subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight (Rossi, p. 11)."

Much has changed since John Adams time, and though he and his colleagues did not expressly include women in any Constitutional provisions they did establish the frame women have worked within to establish political equality for themselves. The suffrage movement secured the right to vote in the early part of this century but its goals were not to elect women to office. That specific idea did not emerge until the 1950's and did not gain widespread support until the late 1960's (Darcy, Welch, Clark, p. 2-3).

In looking at the history of the suffrage movement in the United States, we find that it started at the local level of government. Though women were not allowed to vote in federal elections, states often granted women suffrage in their own constitutions as they joined the Union. "While eighteenth-century constitutions denied women the franchise, those of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to leave regulation of suffrage to legislation (Darcy, Welch, Clark, p. 10)." In fact, eight of the last ten western states admitted to the Union gave women full suffrage within the state before the passing of the federal Constitutional amendment granting women the right to vote nationally (ibid.).

The argument for women's suffrage was a moral one. Women would clean up government, expanding their traditional roles at home to society at large. It was also argued that

women's suffrage would help outweigh the element of the black and immigrant vote in favor of white, nationalist society. It is noteworthy that there were no traces of any arguments advocating a suffragist ballot to elect women to office. Rather, the ballot would allow women to influence male politicians and lobby for reforms, as well as overrule or initiate legislative action as is done in Washington state (Darcy, Welch, Clark, p. 13.).

Women first began holding political office at the local level. It is speculated that women became involved in the local political arena because it is more closely related to the private realm of the home which women have traditionally been relegated to, and also because decision making processes are more oriented towards consensus building rather than confrontation (Darcy, Welch, Clark, p. 11). The traditional role of local governments includes such things as caring for the poor as well as community and land management, all of which fit in to the sphere of women's traditional activities. Also, local politics is much more an extension of personal relationships allowing women to participate without being "politicians" (ibid.).

Currently most women officeholders in the United States still hold office at the local level. Local politics is often a jumping-off point to state legislature politics. State legislatures are important to women for two reasons: they are primarily concerned with issues that concern women such as domestic violence, welfare, abortion, and comparable worth issues; and they are strategic jumping-off points to higher office (Darcy, Welch, Clark, p. 51). As a subsection of the study of women in politics, the study of women in state legislatures is even newer than the general subject. Because state legislatures can be studied as microcosms of the nation they can help us to predict what the future may hold for the nation's government, and therefore the study of women legislators is very important despite its infancy. In a state legislature such as Washington's which has the highest number of women officeholders, such studies can provide a basis for what may be expected across the nation and in Congress as more women acquire higher political offices.

II. BACKGROUND & HYPOTHESIS

Nearly twenty years have passed since the first substantial study was done on women legislators in statehouses. The findings of that first study suggested distinct differences between women legislators and their male colleagues. It was noted that, "Research on the political attitudes of officeholders shows marked differences between female and male state legislators (Thomas, p. 33)." The findings suggested that women were more detail oriented and more willing to cooperate and come up with alternative solutions, yet men appeared to be more effective (Thomas, p. 34).

Research done ten years later, in the 1980's, suggested that women were coming into their own within the legislative arena. Women officeholders were focusing less on constituent casework and substantially increasing their legislative activities and ambitions (Thomas, p. 50-51). By the end of the decade women officeholders in statehouses had achieved a mastery of the system that rendered them contending, effective legislators. It was found that, "In terms of getting their priority legislation passed, women legislators are more likely to succeed than men legislators (Darcy, Welch, Clark, p. 182)."

The research in the late 1980's suggests that women were having a noticeable effect , "Both men and women state legislators think women are making a difference in getting legislatures to give attention to and legislate on matters pertaining to women and affecting spending priorities (ibid.)." First of all, when women make up a higher proportion of the legislature it follows that they would tend to make women's issues a higher priority than when their numbers are few. Women state legislators tend to be more liberal than their male colleagues regardless of age or party (ibid). Also, party discipline is weak in the United States and even weaker in Washington State. All of this suggests that overall women vote differently than men.

The research conducted in the 1970's and 1980's, among other things, attempted to discern whether or not women would reform the existing system, or, if women would simply adopt the existing standards and systems. The discernment was left unclear due to the, "incremental nature

and pace of change (Thomas, p. 53).” In order to conduct reformation of the system, women officeholders must maintain their positions and fully understand and master the current system, as well as be elected to office in higher numbers. There is a normative belief that, “With substantive representation, women will bring different kinds of public policies to the legislative agenda – they will alter the status quo (Thomas, p. 57).” This belief shifts the discussion from reformation of the system to legislated policy and agendas. Sue Thomas, who was involved in conducting the aforementioned research, believes that, “it is in the area of legislative product that differences must occur (Thomas, p. 56).”

Nearly a decade after the most recent substantial research on the issues of reformation and policy surrounding women officeholders in statehouses finds the Washington State Legislature boasting the highest number of women officeholders in the nation. In fact, women make up the majority in the Senate Democratic Caucus. It has been suggested that many western and northwestern states such as Washington have a more moralistic political subculture which is thought to be a better climate for women candidates. This culture fosters a political elite that emphasize honesty and selfless commitment and encourages amateur participation. The suggestion holds that women would be attracted to this moralistic political culture and would be welcomed by the political elite within it (Darcy, Welch, Clark, p. 56).

The Washington State Legislature is an ideal environment to conduct further research on the questions left unanswered by the aforementioned research results in the 1980’s pertaining to reformation and policy. The research I have pursued is aimed at following up on the questions left unanswered in the 1980’s through interviews with legislators from the Washington State Legislature. The hypothesis tested is:

Within the Washington State Legislature there is no (formally) recognized reformation taking place on behalf of the female officeholders. Rather, women are using their increased numbers and acquired mastery of the system to conduct business in a manner that deviates from the historical norm. The resulting legislation is reflective of the change in process and increased human service priorities.

It was expected to be found that some, but not all of the women officeholders, are conducting business in a manner that deviates from the historical norm and those same women's legislative agendas also deviate from the historical norm. The changes expected to be found would reflect the incremental nature of the legislature. Incremental change is slow, and happens as a result of working within the established system. A consequence of such a method would be that many of the changes expected have yet to be realized.

It was expected to be found that the difference in conduct and legislation are a product of the backgrounds and experiences women bring to the table. Several factors contribute to this expectation. Scholars note that there is an increasingly large body of evidence that suggests women approach public policy making differently than their male colleagues (Dolan, Ford, p. 77). Women's emphasis tends to be more on cooperation and consensus building. They approach power not as benefitting some at others' expense, but as benefiting everyone. This suggests a turn away from confrontational legislative processes to bargaining and accommodation processes (Carey, Niemi, Powell, p. 90). It has been reported that women in state legislatures spend more time than men engaging in coalition-building activities across gender and party lines (ibid). This evidence suggests that women are more committed team players and are not as concerned with individual recognition. It is suggested that these characteristics of women legislators facilitate a more democratic process and therefore better policy outcomes. For example, women committee chairs tend to demonstrate a leadership style that is facilitative rather than controlling the dialogue. This is very important because, "to control the dialogue at this point in the process is to increase the probability that policies will be poorly designed, and insensitive to the needs of its target population and the public at large (Kathlene, p. 202)."

United States Senator, and former Washington State Senator, Patty Murray related an experience that is reflective of the different backgrounds men and women bring to the political arena. The Senator said that at one point in her political career she related a family incident in a debate on the floor. She was told by her male colleagues that it was inappropriate for her to

discuss family on the floor. Despite the reprimand Senator Murray's technique was effective and soon she noticed many of her male colleagues had begun to relate family experiences to illustrate points also.

Men will draw on the conduct of women when it is effective, just as women will draw on the conduct of men. This research is not concerned with a battle between the genders. It is about how both genders can and do contribute to the legislative process in order to make it more representative of the whole constituency.

III. NATURE OF THE RESEARCH

The design used in conducting the research was intended to test the hypothesis in a qualitative manner through open-ended interviews. This field study method has been chosen because it is directed towards ascertaining relationships between factors (Smith, Johnson, Paulsen, Shocket, p. 119). In this case the factors are women officeholders, reformation, and policy/legislation. Open-ended interviews allow for the, “discussion of issues [to] flow naturally,” so that, “it is possible to understand the logic of an interviewee’s argument and associative thinking that led them to particular conclusions (Devine, p. 138).” The goal is to analyze the interviewee’s subjective experience. “Qualitative methods therefore capture meaning, process, and context (Devine, p. 138).”

Criticisms of qualitative research are not scarce. Qualitative methods are not as objective as quantitative methods. Qualitative operational definitions are much closer to experience than to clear knowledge (Smith, Johnson, Paulsen, Shocket, p. 101). Another major criticism of qualitative research is that it is virtually impossible to replicate and compare. This is due to the lack of consistency over time of the variables. Basically, qualitative research is, “not a basis on which generalizations can be made (Devine, p. 141).”

Despite the fact that one cannot draw generalizations from qualitative research, a study such as this may be the basis for more quantitative analysis by drawing a preliminary picture. In the case of this study, qualitative analysis may aid in discovering variables that might have been overlooked in a purely quantitative study. With a qualitative basis, following studies will be more precise and accurate.

The open-ended interviews focused on:

1. The manner in which women officeholders conduct legislative business;
2. The types of policies women pursue as opposed to their male colleagues; and
3. The legislation resulting from the aforementioned factors.

The process of selecting interviewees was concerned with finding subjects that were not too politically extreme towards the right or left ends of the political spectrum while filling the necessary categories. A representative mix of twelve women and men, current and former, many and few terms served, Democrat and Republican Washington State legislators were interviewed -- three Democratic women, three Democratic men, three Republican women, and three Republican men. In each group of three, there was at least one who has served only two to six years in the legislature and one who has served at least ten. Approximately two-thirds of them hold leadership positions in either their caucus or on a committee, five are representatives, and seven are/were senators.

	Democrat	Republican
Female	16 years, Senate*	11 years, Senate
	11 years, Senate	10 years, Senate
	4 years, House	8 years, House
Male	28 years, Senate	19 years, Senate
	8 years, Senate	15 years, House
	3 years, House	4 years, House

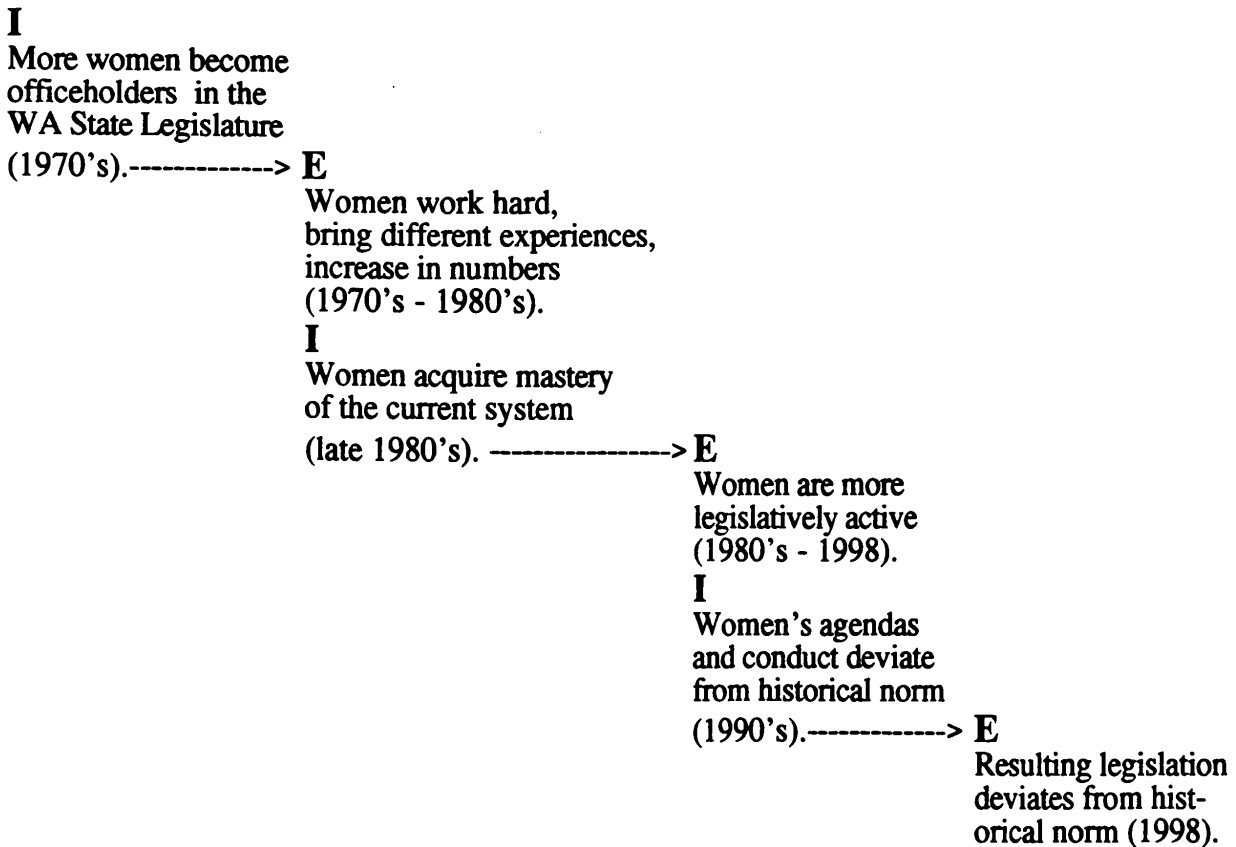
The operational definition for the independent variable of the hypothesis is the increased numbers and acquired mastery of the system of female officeholders in the Washington State Legislature. This definition is valid in that it states exactly what is needed for the research, and it can be measured easily. A simple comparison between the roll call sheets from each chamber of the Washington State Legislature from 1987 and 1998 would demonstrate the increased number of female officeholders, and the aforementioned studies from the 1970's and 1980's measure the

* The years served cited signifies the total time the legislators have served in the state legislature both as a Representative and/or a Senator.

acquired mastery of the system by women.

The operational definition for the dependent variable is the manner in which business is being conducted on the floor, in committee, and in caucus, and the resulting legislation; all of which deviates from the historical norm. This definition is valid in that it is a precise measurement of what we want to know.

The causal chain connecting the independent and dependent variables is as follows:



In order to not reject the hypothesis, a positive relationship between the independent and dependent variables must be illustrated. The information from the interviews would have to suggest that women do conduct business differently and the resulting legislation reflects this difference. Qualitative research, especially of this nature, is not replicable nor comparable (as previously discussed). Therefore, it is not permissible, drawing on this hypothesis and research, to make a generalization about women legislators though it can suggest and support noted trends.

Studying the Washington State Legislature may suggest what can be expected as more women acquire political offices nation wide, but uncontrollable variables limit the possibility of drawing sound conclusions. The Washington State Legislature in itself is an uncontrollable variable which was illustrated in its move from one end of the political spectrum to the other from 1992 to 1994. The institution hyper-reflected national political trends within its elected body, with Democrats gaining a decisive majority in both chambers in 1992, and then Republicans sweeping state legislative races in 1994 with the highest turnover rate in the nation. The fact that Washington has the most women officeholders in its statehouse may also be a hyper-reflection of nation trends and could turn around.

Other variables to be considered include the number of years/terms served in the legislature and political party affiliation. Many of the legislators have only served for two or three terms limiting their perspective. Other legislators have served upwards of twenty years or more. The perspective they have is great and deep. It is important to analyze the perspectives of those two groups in relation to each other. Political party is also an important variable to take into account. There are some theoretical differences between Democrats and Republicans in how they perceive the differences between men and women.

IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The information obtained in the interviews with the twelve state legislatures strongly suggests that women officeholders do conduct business in a manner that differs from their male colleagues, that the women's agendas tend to have a greater emphasis on issues in the area of human services, and that the legislation passed is reflective of the women's different style and priorities. The majority of the findings suggest that the hypothesis,

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should not be rejected. In analyzing the findings we will focus on the three main points discussed in the interviews.

1. THE MANNER IN WHICH WOMEN OFFICEHOLDERS CONDUCT LEGISLATIVE BUSINESS

"In order to be successful, you kind of have to know, and acknowledge, what the game is, but you don't have to play it. . . And once people saw you can be successful doing that, then they realized that those old rules just don't apply anymore."

Time and again the legislators interviewed emphasized that the process has become more open through the engagement of skills such as cooperation, consensus building, bargaining, accommodation, and coalition-building. Several note that decision making has become less of a top-down process which some suggest could be attributable to the increased number of women. "I think there's been more challenging of how their [men's] leadership decisions are made, input from a lot of people, that I have seen a change here. There's not an acceptance of top-down rule in the way I think there used to be." Whether or not women hold leadership positions affects the type of decision making that is made. It is suggested that though women hold many leadership positions, the top is still held by men which makes it more important for women to share

information with each other. “At this point we have more women in leadership in our caucus than men. We don’t have the top position, of course, but I think that what that has caused us to do is just more sharing in discussion of what we’re talking about.”

A legislator that has served just four years believes that the large influx of new legislators in the past several years may also contribute to the change in decision making. “The new people coming in wanted to be more a part of the process and before it had been very top-down decision making. . . so in the course of the last four years I’ve seen a broader base of sharing some of the responsibilities and decision making.” It should be noted that the “new people” include a large number of women.

It is suggested that women’s backgrounds contribute to their style of decision-making. “I think women have, quite often. . . whether it’s as a parent or whether particular jobs that women have had, they’ve been in the position of having to work with a lot of people and work things out instead of just being the one who makes the final decision.” Generally, “women are more open to problem solving – men seem to come in and stake out territory. . . and women come in and say ‘how can we fix this?’ . . . First the [men] have to establish some boundaries somewhere and then they get to the problem solving step.” Yet another legislator related, “in my experience women are much more prone to share information, to not guard information, but to share it. . . In short, simply I think because of the differences in men and women’s upbringing, women are much less likely to regard the legislative process as a game. . . as a general rule, women legislators are more likely to be happy to get something accomplished and give the credit to somebody else. They are more willing to take a behind-the-scenes role if they can be more effective that way.”

The noted difference between men and women legislators is explained in different terms by a male legislator who believes, “A lot of times men look more at data, that if you know the data the data will set you free (laughs). Maybe women, sometimes, look at it more as how it makes them feel.”

2. THE TYPES OF POLICIES WOMEN PURSUE AS OPPOSED TO THEIR MALE COLLEAGUES

“I have seen the metamorphosis from what had been traditionally thought of as women’s issues -- education, day care, social service -- and that’s kind of the only thing that women really wielded any power in policy making. Now . . . all the committees have been opened up for the women’s influence in the policies.”

It is continuously asserted that women are no longer relegated (and perhaps never were) to policy areas traditionally thought of as “women’s issues.” While acknowledging that women have always been more interested in the human services, one legislator also noted that one’s district is a large determining factor in policy priorities. Another has found that, “the priorities for committee are pretty much determined by the committee you sit on. . . the fact is there may be a lot of women who want to serve on children and families or healthcare.”

One legislator made it clear that to her, “if an issue has merit it has not gender. . . So I don’t look for the differences [in policy priorities between men and women].” One of this legislator’s male colleagues believes, “women have just as broad a political spectrum of views as do men . . . I just think women legislators are as different as the men legislators, they come from all different specters.”

Several male legislators hold that women do bring different agendas and priorities to the table. One legislator stated, “women bring some issues that they have more of a sensitivity to . . . I think that’s pretty standard.” Another has observed that, “naturally women bring a little different agenda, like those four or five items [choice, childcare, welfare, etc.] and I’m sure that there are others that are different than men, even though there are a lot of men that are strong supporters of those women’s issues.” It is recognized by one legislator that, “We do more children’s issues now because of the women that are here. They have been more connected, I believe . . . health, child care, those areas have been highlighted because of some things that have been highlighted nationally, but primarily because women are more connected to children, generally, than men.”

3. THE LEGISLATION RESULTING FROM THE AFOREMENTIONED FACTORS

“I think we’ve probably passed better policy because there is more open working debate on it, so I think the quality of the legislation has, perhaps, gone up.”

In discussing how women officeholders have changed the process many of those interviewed emphasize characteristics and skills such as cooperation, consensus building, bargaining, accommodation, and coalition-building. It is suggested by some of the research previously discussed that these characteristics and skills facilitate a more democratic process and therefore better policy outcomes (Kathlene, p. 202). The information collected in the interviews support this suggestion. “The women that have been elected have really, I think, helped change that [decision making process] so that the leadership efforts and the development of policy is more collaborative, members are more involved in general about developing policy positions and becoming voices for that so that there has clearly been a contributory factor. . . I generally think, overall, in a general sense, the process and the decision making and the things like that have gotten a lot more open, a lot more collaborative, which I think is, in part, driven by the women legislators.”

It is also suggested by the information in the majority of the interviews that the content of the legislation is reflective of the numbers of women and their agenda priorities. It is continuously expressed throughout the interviews that women have been more sensitive to issues of human service such as health care, child care, and education. At the same time it is noted that there are women on every committee; therefore, women effect every issue. One of the women interviewed expressed the different aspects influencing what is a high priority agenda item, “human services will always have more women interested in that,” and, “your district sort of determines some things.” She also stated that the budget is often the means used in attaining prioritized ends.

Of course there are exceptions. Two of those interviewed expressed that there is no difference between women and men officeholders regarding the manner that business is conducted. Consequently, the same two do not recognize any difference in the legislation passed. There are

several factors that could be effecting their perspective. Both individuals are Republican, men, hold leadership positions within their respective caucuses, and have served in the legislature for fifteen or more years.

Much of Republican ideology is rooted in Classical Liberal theory which values individual liberty and equality above most everything else. Classical Liberal theory strips individuals of all of their defining characteristics, such as gender or color, in order to find the common, equal ground. One of the two that holds this view stated, “I don’t see the difference between the men and the women because they are all major players and they all play a key role.”

The fact that these two are men is relevant in that the trend in Classical Liberal theory is to measure things against the male standard. Only one of the three Republican women interviewed even faintly reflected this theory and then qualified it, “if an issue has merit, it has merit. It doesn’t have gender . . . Some women . . . do put gender on their issues.” She recognizes the reality of the matter.

The two interviewees’ seniority and leadership positions are relevant in comparing the information they provided with the information provided by the third Republican male who has been in office for only four years and so does not have a high leadership position. The junior Republican male expresses that he believes women officeholders have changed the process by stabilizing the environment with more and different viewpoints, making the legislature as a whole more representative of the state. He also holds, “There are definitely some bills that would probably not have had the discussion if we did not have women. . . “

V. CONCLUSION

“I think we’ve made an impact. It takes a long time of repeating, repeating, repeating, but we do make an impact. . . I think that we want to reach out and take better care of the children, to make sure that they are okay.”

The information obtained in the interviews support the assertion that women legislators do conduct business in a manner that deviates from the historical norm, that women’s agendas generally do include more human service priorities, and that the resulting legislation reflects the differences. These findings support the established base of noted research. They also establish another basis for more concrete quantitative research. The effects of the variables of party and tenure can be noted and therefore be considered more appropriately.

It is possible to speculate with these findings what could happen across the nation as more women attain higher office. But, it is important not to make sweeping generalizations and note the unique political climate of Washington state which, as previously noted, tends to hyper-reflect national trends. In the March 8, 1998, issue of *The Seattle Times*, there was an article about a Republican state senator (not interviewed) who, “decries a Legislature he says is the most partisan and least deliberative he’s seen since his first job here as a bill clerk 38 years ago (Mapes, B1).” This flies in the face of what the findings suggest. In the same paper there is an article about a female state senator who went into a tirade on the floor shouting at her colleagues, staffers, and citizens because her flowers had been moved (Postman, B3). This also does not appear to be in line with what the findings suggest is the norm for female officeholder’s behavior. Though these two incidents should be considered, it is important to recognize that they are isolated and singular in nature. General conclusions drawn on their basis would be even more suspect than those drawn on this qualitative research.

The findings support that Sue Thomas’ previously stated belief that, “it is in the area of legislative product that differences must occur (Thomas, p. 56).” As women have increased in

numbers, have become entrenched, and have learned to work within and without the system they have had a real effect on priority issues and the according legislation passed. The change is noted as a positive effect, by those legislators who recognize it, by creating a more democratic and representative body in the Washington State Legislature.

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