

# Is there a Critical Mass? Gender Composition and Behavior in US City Councils\*

Emilia Brito, Jesse Bruhn,  
Thea How Choon, and E. Anna Weber

July 2023

## Abstract

How does gender composition influence individual and group behavior? To study this question empirically, we assembled a new, national sample of United States city council elections. Within this sample, we digitized information from the minutes of over 40,000 city-council meetings. These documents describe the number and type of motions proposed by each councilor as well as the outcomes of consequential votes pertaining to the operation of city government. The resulting data includes rich measures of group behavior, individual behavior, city council gender composition, and municipal expenditures. Using a close-election regression discontinuity design, we find that replacing a male councilor with a female councilor results in a 25p.p. increase in the share of motions proposed by women. This is despite causing only a 20p.p. increase in the council female share. We find that the discrepancy is driven, in part, by behavioral changes by isolated female councilors. When a lone woman is joined by a new female colleague, she participates more actively by proposing more motions. However, these apparent changes in behavior do not translate into clear differences in voting patterns or spending. Taken together, our results highlight the importance of “tokenism” for inhibiting female participation in a real-world, high-stakes setting, and provide mixed evidence on the importance of having a “critical mass” of female representation for affecting outcomes in political decision making bodies.

---

\*Emilia Brito: Department of Economics, Brown University. Email: ebritore@brown.edu. Jesse Bruhn: Department of Economics, Brown University. Email: jesse.bruhn@brown.edu. Thea How Choon: Department of Economics, St. Lawrence University. Email: thowchoon@stlawu.edu. E. Anna Weber: Department of Social Sciences, United States Military Academy. Email: anna.weber@westpoint.edu. All opinions expressed in this presentation are those of the authors and do not represent the opinions of the United States Military Academy (USMA), the United States Army, or the Department of Defense