

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Capitol Hill's Heroines

THE SOURCE: "The Jackie (and Jill) Robinson Effect: Why Do Congresswomen Outperform Congressmen?" by Sarah F. Anzia and Christopher R. Berry, in *American Journal of Political Science*, July 2011.

WOMEN MAY BE UNDERREPRESENTED in Congress, but those who get elected to office are no shrinking violets. Research by political scientists Sarah F. Anzia of Stanford University and Christopher R. Berry of the University of Chicago shows that congresswomen are more effective on Capitol Hill than their male counterparts. Female legislators secure nine percent more federal discretionary spending for their districts than congressmen do—on average, a difference of \$49 million per district annually. They also sponsor about three more bills per Congress than their male peers (the average per member is 18), and cosponsor roughly 26 more bills.

Would Congress be more effective if more women were elected? (They've held an average of just 17 percent of the seats in recent years.) It's not likely, Anzia and Berry say. Congresswomen aren't overachievers because women are intrinsically better legislators, the authors argue, but because the barriers to entry for women in congressional politics are so high that those who succeed simply have more talent and put in more effort than the average man who wins at the polls.

If those barriers were to fall, so would the performance level of most female legislators.

The authors attribute women's superior performance in Congress to what they call the "Jill Robinson effect." Like the famed African-American baseball player Jackie Robinson, whose combination of great athletic talent and outstanding character persuaded the major leagues to desegregate, congresswomen have to prove their mettle and then some before they can win entry to the fortress that is Capitol Hill. The persistence of discrimination against female politicians, even in the wake of the 2008 presidential campaign, in which Hillary Clinton finished a close second for the Democratic nomination, is indicated by a recent survey that found 23 percent of American adults believed men to be more emotionally suited for politics than

women. In another survey, 11 percent said that they wouldn't vote for a woman for president even if she were qualified for the job.

Women are conscious of the bias, and it discourages all but the most competitive would-be female congressional candidates from entering the electoral fray, Anzia and Berry argue. One study found that 90 percent of women with a suitable profile for political office reported believing that there would be prejudice against them in political contests because of their gender.

Female candidates running in conservative districts have to be especially tenacious. Yet there is a considerable payoff that comes with electing a woman in these locales, Anzia and Berry find. Conservative congresswomen bring home even more federal dollars than their female colleagues from liberal districts.

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

The Grim Dawn of the Republic

THE SOURCE: "America's Revolution: Economic Disaster, Development, and Equality" by Peter H. Lindert and Jeffrey G. Williamson, in *Vox EU* (voxeu.org), July 15, 2011.

BY 1840, THE UNITED STATES was a member of the club of prosperous nations, enjoying strong growth rates that outshone even Great Britain's. But the country's phenomenal per-

formance masked an economic calamity that had shaken it only a few decades earlier, a period that may have been one of America's darkest financial hours. From 1774 to 1800, say economists Peter H. Lindert of the University of California, Davis, and Jeffrey G. Williamson of Harvard, the United States experienced "a decline almost as steep as during



Americans may have been victorious in the Revolution but they paid a high price: The war pitched the U.S. economy into what historically may have been its steepest decline.

the Great Depression . . . and certainly longer.”

The colonists were already better off than the British in many ways before the Revolution, and Lindert and Williamson’s analysis shows that they were even wealthier than previously thought. The society the British seeded had turned out to be strikingly egalitarian, and, apart from the top two percent of income earners, colonists earned more than their British counterparts. The South was especially flush, with per capita income double that of New England, even when slaves were counted as part of the population.

During the Revolutionary War, combat and the British occupation of key cities destroyed industries and infrastructure, while inflation wreaked havoc on the weak financial system. Overseas trade was disrupted, and Americans were shut

out of lucrative British markets. Well-educated Loyalists decamped for the mother country or for Canada, taking their skills with them.

White-collar workers made up 13 percent of the American labor force before the Revolution, but only eight percent in 1800. The South suffered a particularly harsh reversal of fortune. The war reduced the upper South’s exports of rice, tobacco, and other commodities by 39 percent and the lower South’s by 50 percent.

All told, American incomes dropped by 22 to 28 percent between 1774 and 1800, Lindert and Williamson estimate. When the decline ended is not entirely clear; some economists believe that incomes began to grow again in the 1790s. If that is the case, say Lindert and Williamson, the period immediately following the Revolution may have seen a fall

even more rapid than their calculations show, constituting “America’s greatest income slump ever.”

The North rebounded from the catastrophe quickly, posting 2.1 percent annual growth in per capita income between 1800 and 1840, largely on the strength of its industrial output. The South took much longer to recover; by 1840, the region’s personal income per capita still had not reached prewar levels. The country’s overall growth rate of 1.26 percent during that period put it solidly in the camp of modern economies, defined as those growing by at least one percent annually. “Without the 1774–90 economic disaster,” Lindert and Williamson write, “it appears that America might well have recorded a modern economic growth performance even earlier, [becoming] perhaps the first [country] on the planet to do so.”

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

Back to Basics for Economics

THE SOURCE: “Economics in Crisis” by J. Bradford DeLong, in *The Economists’ Voice*, May 2011.

THE FINANCIAL CRISIS LAID waste to many things—the housing market, the banking system, individual 401(k)s. A less noticed but still significant casualty was the confidence of many of the nation’s leading economists, among them J. Bradford DeLong of the University of California, Berkeley.