



WIPP WORKS IN WASHINGTON

Women Should Be Heard in Congress

By Ann Sullivan

Part of this year's election talk has been focused on women and the role elected officials play in their personal choices. Agitated by the media coverage, polling showed that women increased Obama's numbers in April. In the latest polls, single women support Obama 2-1. While he holds a slight lead among women who are married, Romney is within striking distance. Political strategists agree that women play a powerful role in who is elected President.

While we have the power at the polls, we wondered if that translates to a powerful voice in Congress. So, WIPP analyzed Congressional hearings over the last year to see how often women were included as witnesses. Legislation is generated from ideas proposed at its hearings, a legal and legislative record is built from testimony and legislators develop important impressions based on the people that testify before them.

This is what we found. Forty-three percent of standing Congressional Committees and 42.8% of select/joint committee hearings did not include women last year. This shocking number does not even include hearings where only government witnesses testified because it would have skewed the numbers to be far worse, given only 30% of women occupy high level government positions (*Women In The Federal Government: Ambitions and Achievements, US Merit Protection Board, May 2011*). It only reflects the lack of women testifying on Congressional panels where private sector witnesses testified.

What are the reasons behind this disparity? Although we are not interested in guessing Congress' motives, we know that those who are chosen to testify are CEOs and the Presidents of companies and organizations. Given that women head only 12 of all Fortune 500 companies, and very few women head think tanks and major trade associations, the picture becomes a little clearer. However, women head up roughly 30% of all firms in the U.S., according to the US Census. That's 7.8 million women who run their own businesses. And of course, women represent half of the US population.

It is hard to fathom that, given these numbers, Congress cannot find qualified women to testify. Perhaps they need to rethink their specifications about whom they are seeking. In WIPP's opinion, they need to start utilizing women business owners. Think of the change Congress could make in the leadership of companies and organizations if they started asking the women to testify on their panels.

Congressional Committees set their own rules. So, it would not be difficult to implement a rule that says a hearing will not go forward unless a woman is represented on the panel of witnesses.

Instead of talking about us, Congress should talk to us. [Talk To Us 2012](#) is a project of Women Impacting Public Policy to create a network dedicated to ensuring women's voices are heard in conversations that impact their economic futures.