

Wendy Smooth On the Impact of ...d Gender on Legislators' Power

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SPEAKERS

Eva Dale, David Staley, Wendy Smooth

- E** Eva Dale 00:00
From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.
- D** David Staley 00:32
Wendy Smooth is an Associate Professor in the Department of Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies at The Ohio State University College of the Arts and Sciences. She is at work on a book titled Perceptions of Power and Influence, which will examine the impact of race and gender on the distribution of power and influence in state legislatures. Welcome to Voices, Dr. Smooth.
- W** Wendy Smooth 00:53
Glad to be here.
- D** David Staley 00:54
So, tell us what is the impact of race and gender on the distribution of power and influence in legislatures? Tell us about your research.



W

Wendy Smooth 01:01

Absolutely, thank you so much for having me and the opportunity to talk about it. It's such a wonderful and timely topic, given all of the attention we have on diversity in our governing bodies. The work that I've been doing with state legislatures is really around thinking about the question of what does it mean, for institutions that have been predominantly governed by white men in our historical configurations, what does it mean to open the doors of those institutions to different voices, to different ideas, in the embodiment of, from my perspective, women of color, and in particular, African American women? So the study that I did looked at Georgia, Maryland, and Mississippi, which at that time, were the three states with the largest numbers of African American women serving in the legislature. And the question that I was simply asking is how do institutions respond to difference? And one of the things that we see is that though these women are coming in great number to those legislative bodies, those legislative bodies have not always responded with an open door to their presence. And the continuous struggle has been to get a seat at the table, and as Shirley Chisholm once said, "If you don't have a seat at the table, bring a folding chair."

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David Staley 02:31

She did, indeed.

W

Wendy Smooth 02:33

Yes. And these women indeed have brought folding chairs. And over time that they've served in the legislature, what we've seen is that they are predominantly Democrats, and the legislatures that they serve in have gone from Democratic control to Republican control. So one of the things that we also see is that these women have had an opportunity to show their party members what it's like to be an outsider on the inside, because they are no longer in the majority governing party. One of the women that I didn't have a chance to interview, but her story resonates with the stories of the women I did talk with, is Stacey Abrams out of Georgia, and as you know-

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David Staley 03:16

Very much in the news today. How did - and I don't know if this is part of your research - how did these, how did these women of color sort of get in the door? The sound like very restrictive sort of institutions, what's the process by which they entered?

W

Wendy Smooth 03:17

Very much in the news today. But I tracked the earlier part of her political career, in terms of her life as a state legislator, and she just recently wrote a book called *Minority Leader*, where it's a play on both being a woman of color and a leader, as well as actually being the minority leader of the Georgia legislature. And so, many of the stories and experiences that she shares in that book is the same story of the women that I interviewed who precede her a bit in terms of their terms in office. But this idea of how do you lead from the outside, it's a challenging question, but it's a question that women of color are well positioned to answer. Sure. So a lot of

them, if look at the history of women of color coming into electoral office, one of the things that we see is the introduction of majority minority districts, where we've made concerted efforts under the Voting Rights Act of 1965 - which we know does not hold the same power it once held - but there was an interest in creating districts where minority groups could actually elect a representative of their choosing. And so, that's the creation of majority minority districts and for a number of women of color, African American women in particular, both at the state level and at the federal level, their entry into political office came initially through majority minority districts, where the lines were drawn in such a way that communities of color could actually elect candidates who more directly represented their interest. And that was their entry.

D David Staley 05:17

I don't know if this is part of your research, or whether in how you could comment on this, but you're looking at a particular kind of institution, state legislatures. Is the picture any different for women of color in other sorts of institutions - corporations, let's say, universities?

W Wendy Smooth 05:34

That's a wonderful question, and it's a question I get often. When I've presented my work in different venues, immediately, women will say, well, those are the same kinds of institutional barriers that I face in business or that I face in medicine or in academia. A number of times that I've presented this work with colleagues across the country, the tone or the conversation quickly shifts from, oh, that's a state legislature to wait a minute, that sounds like the dynamics of our department or the the dynamics of a particular college. So yes, a lot of institutional comparison fits with this work because there's so much overlap, because the central question really is guided by or the central part of the research is guided by how do institutions respond to difference? You know, do they come in with an open and inviting approach or are there mechanisms to preserve the existing power structures in the institution? So, you know, the ideal is to get with colleagues who do this work in business or who do this work in medicine and, you know, do a little comparison across institutions.

D David Staley 06:52

Do you think that legislatures are distinctive in any way, in the sorts of barriers that are in place?

W Wendy Smooth 06:57

Oh, certainly. So, when we think about the actual rules of the institution, one of the things that I look very closely at is the, the formal rules of the institution. So, we have rules about committee assignments and the configurations of committees and the duties, roles, and responsibilities of various leadership positions in the legislature, which are codified. And we can then look at the ways in which the rules are deployed in various circumstances as a way of evaluating the openness. We hope that we have institutions that are designed to preserve democracy with a small d, and one of the ways that we can test the veracity of our democracy is whether or not it stands up to shifts in the demographics and whether or not we are still

holding on to democratic principles of deliberation and governance. And one of the things that I find in the study is that, though we think about these rules as being very rigid, they actually do bend and shift and change based on the actors that are involved in using the rules and benefiting from the rules and bending the rules. So we have both, you know, those formal rules, but we also have a number of informal rules, and this is where state legislatures start to look a lot like other institutions, right? So one of the rules that we might think about, our informal rules, our caucuses, convenings, the way that we gather in human contact, and then thinking about who is present during those informal engagements. So, if there's a Wednesday morning coffee club, and it's all men participating in the Wednesday morning coffee club, and no one ever asks, why is it all men, and what decisions are we making in this moment; that's an informal rule, an informal norm, that's a part of the governing structure of the institution, because everyone knows that the guys are there together at Wednesday morning, if you want to get something done, you participate in that Wednesday morning conversation. But if women are not, don't have access to that space, then we've constricted power, or designed power in a very particular way. And we see that in other institutions, we see that on our campuses when, you know, groups of people are going to lunch together and not everyone goes to lunch together or, you know, go to play basketball at the RPAC or some other facility. So, we see those kinds of informal ways that power circulates that we are not as attuned to thinking about the ramifications of our day to day work, when we configure our social relationships.

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David Staley 09:52

We mentioned Stacey Abrams a minute or two ago and, at the time of this recording, the Georgia governor's race still hasn't been decided yet. So, you must have observations about what we've just experienced this week.

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Wendy Smooth 10:04

History in the making. So, I've studied this for 20 years now in terms of women of color in politics, and I've always talked about this dearth of women running for executive offices, or even gaining access to executive office. And then here we are in 2018, and this moment of an African American woman running for governor in a southern state government, Having walked the halls of many of those offices in Georgia, I'm just riveted by this even possibility. So one of the things that I've talked to my students about over the last few weeks in anticipation of the election and then on yesterday and talking about what does this mean that it is undecided, I wanted to mark the historic moment of an African American woman, one, winning the nomination from her party, and then in a state like Georgia, it's a real commentary on the interest of women of color in leading, not only in voting, but also in leading. And that's actually another part of the work that I do in terms of looking at women of color in public office. One of the things that we've seen in the last few presidential election cycles and also in the midterm elections is this really strong voter turnout among African American women and Latinas. And there's the real story there to think about, not only their interest in voting, but also whether or not these reliable voters are candidates, potential candidates for public office, and then who's paying attention to that potential. What we're seeing and what the research shows us is that political parties operate in much the same way that we talked about with legislators, they use their networks of friends that they regularly see. And so, the political parties are not well suited to reach out to women of color candidates, women of color for potential, to become potential candidates for office. And what we're seeing are a number of women of color-led organizations

that are stepping up to train women to run for public office, to recruit them to run for public office, and then also to connect them with political action committees, PACs, who will also raise money for them. Stacey Abrams is one who talks about her experiences going through one of these women of color-led training initiatives, and there are other women across the country who are success stories in that way. And that's really an untold story of, how do you break up the effects of the good old boy networks in politics, and it's actually something that I'm looking into with a colleague from the University of Kansas, Christina Bejarano, and I are working on a project that tells the story of these organizations that are doing the work that we traditionally think political parties are best suited to do. But when it comes to women, and comes to women of color, those party organizations are not doing that work, and so women of color are stepping in to do it themselves.

D David Staley 13:28

Before you came to Ohio State, you were Senior Research and Policy Associate with the Center for Women's Policy Studies in Washington D.C., which I understand is the oldest feminist research and policy organization in the country?

W Wendy Smooth 13:40

Yes. And they have actually since closed their doors, unfortunately. But that was an incredible experience.

D David Staley 13:49

Tell us about that experience, what sort of research did you engage in with them?

W Wendy Smooth 13:54

So with that organization, I was actually a graduate student at the University of Maryland, and we were only funded for nine months out of the year as graduate students and so you were on your own. And having watched - I went to the University of Maryland - and having Washington D.C. at your back door was very convenient for a Government and Politics Major like myself. So I found this organization, of all places, in the Washington Post, advertising for a research associate or research assistant at the time, who had skills in quantitative analysis, but also an interest in women's issues, and discrimination issues and women in the workplace.

D David Staley 14:36

And you were checking off these boxes.

W Wendy Smooth 14:38

And I kept reading the ad over and over again and had someone else read it to me to make

sure I was not fantasizing over something in the Washington Post. And for years, we always joked, I joked, that I couldn't believe I found them and they always joked that they couldn't believe that the Washington Post's worked and found me. But for a number of years, I did work in Washington, D.C., looking at national policy around women's issues, everything from women and HIV/AIDS, which at that time, we were still very much not attuned to thinking about HIV and its impacts on women's lives. So, I had a great opportunity to be at the forefront of some of that research in terms of thinking about the impact on women's lives, looking at discrimination practices in workplaces, for women of color in particular, and how do women of color uniquely balance work and family issues. I had opportunities to look at women of color in domestic violence issues and thinking about the relevance and the usefulness of the Violence Against Women's Act for women of color, Native American women, so just a wonderful array of research topics. And at the time that I finished my dissertation, I was at this impasse of trying to decide between academia and continuing that work in the policy realm, and it was a real difficult decision.

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David Staley 16:10

Why, why would it be a difficult decision?

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Wendy Smooth 16:12

Because I loved, I loved the work that I was doing, you were in conversations with decision makers, you were briefing congressional staff members. So it was a direct line into policymaking, and that was very inviting and very invigorating. But, I also was being trained as an academic to pursue my own research questions and research questions that weren't necessarily driven by the national politics of the day, but the opportunity to follow a puzzle for an extended period of time without the external pressures of a funder wanting a deliverable or a national committee in need of moving a conversation forward in a short period of time. So those were the differences, some of the major differences that I had to consider. And I knew that once I was finished, I had a window of opportunity to get on the job market, and to try out academia. And I landed my first job, and I landed here. But I have to say that that work with the Center for Women Policy Studies continues to inform my approach in my teaching. I am quick to offer my students an understanding of making your work legible and useful to the larger world in which we live and to draw out avenues, to make connections between your work and what's going on in the world. So in lots of my policy classes, it ends with this idea of what is the role of the researcher in public policy, and in shaping public policy? So that work has remained a part of who I am as a teacher, and I think it also amplifies my work at an institution such as Ohio State, that's a land grant institution. And I think that that is a part of the mission of Ohio State, and I always kind of bring that into how I extend myself to the community as well.

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David Staley 18:20

You were recently appointed Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion for the College of Arts and Sciences. Tell us a little bit about your responsibilities in this role.

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Wendy Smooth 18:29

Yes, so always an opportunity for growth at the Ohio State University. And be careful what all you say yes to. It's been a wonderful ride. So, I am in a newly constituted position in the College of Arts and Sciences, where we are saying that diversity, equity and inclusion is an important and critical aspect of the work that we do, and it helps to define excellence in the college. And so in order to really do that work, we need a strategic plan or a strategic thinker to lead those efforts. Certainly, most of that work is happening from the ground up in our departments and in our centers, but I am tasked with strategically thinking about the college's interest in diversity, equity, and inclusion, and how we communicate that out to the larger campus community and also to the wider Ohio community, because as the College of Arts and Sciences, we so often say we're the heartbeat of the university, and if we are doing well in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and that's everything from thinking about the diversity of our faculty and our staff and our students, to also thinking about our curriculum options for our students such that we are educating our students for a 21st century world that is far more diverse than we have ever lived in, and we have to equip them for the kinds of questions, challenges, and complexities that they will face. And so, part of my work is making sure that we're creating an environment in the College of Arts and Sciences where those kinds of questions thrive.

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David Staley 20:11

How do we establish that environment, what are the ways in which we can accomplish that?

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Wendy Smooth 20:15

Sure. So one way that we can accomplish that is looking at the climate, in our departments and in our centers, such that we are welcoming departments, where our colleagues can thrive, that their research questions are supported, where we have diversity among our faculty and among our staff and among our students, so that we have the right people around the table to ask the challenging questions. So that's one way that we make this kind of strategic turn, if you will, in our work. And then also bringing the questions of diversity, equity, and inclusion front and center to everything we do, this is not an addition, but if we are working towards - which we all are - excellence, then we have to be thinking about these issues because they are one with our definition of excellence.

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David Staley 21:05

You talked about your students in some of the classes you teach - tell us about your classes, what sorts of things do you teach?

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Wendy Smooth 21:10

Yes. I teach courses on women, gender, race, and public policy. A course that I'm offering this semester, which has been an incredible amount of fun, is a course called "Black Women Representations and Power." So for some, and we always craft our course names really broadly to reach a number of our faculty who can teach it, but when I teach representation, I'm also thinking about the political world, in terms of thinking about women of color and representation as my research does. But this year, this course was incredible, because we started out thinking

about how do black women respond to the issues that they encounter in their everyday lives in their everyday world, how do they speak back to the power configurations of the world in which they inhabit? So the fun thing, I turned a lemon into lemonade, the passing of Aretha Franklin right at the beginning of the semester, and I was so struck by her life and all of the things that we were learning about her political activism, her understanding of herself as a race woman in music, so we started there. So my students were able to do analyses of her lyrics and of her presentation, of her narrative, about her life and about her evolution as a woman. So the whole, you know, you make me feel like a natural woman, we talked about what could that mean in the context of her overall life. So, talk about energizing a group of students. Now, whether or not I lived up to it all throughout this semester, we'll see. But that was a great way to kick off the semester. So, that's a great course that I'm offering this year.

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David Staley 22:56


And you mentioned this previously, but I'm also curious to know more about your research agenda. What's next, what's next after this book is published?


W


Wendy Smooth 23:03

Yes. So a couple of things are on the table. One, I just mentioned the research around these emergent groups that are involved with changing women from thinking of themselves only as voters to thinking about themselves as political leaders fit to run for public office, and the role that those groups are playing in shaping the political landscape. So that's one project that I'm really excited about. Another project that I've just completed with Professor Elaine Richardson, in the College of Education and Human Ecology, is a work looking at girls of color and their leadership possibilities. So these training groups that I just spoke about, they usually target professional women, young professional women. Our questions were, by the time you're a young, professional woman, you've already decided that politics is not for you, that you've already decided that that's not something of interest. So what happens when we start to talk to young girls about their leadership possibilities? And Dr. Richardson and I looked at this question from a particular vantage point of girls who are coming of age at this moment, who have seen an African American man as the President of the United States of America. They've seen three black, queer women, lead a global movement, Black Lives Matter, and they've also seen a woman run for the presidency of the United States with Hillary Clinton. Looking at that landscape, how do they see themselves and their future and their current possibilities for leadership? So we had an opportunity to do focus groups with girls ages eight to fourteen in the Columbus area, to talk to them about their leadership possibilities, which was such an amazing set of focus groups and conversations. I could talk to those girls for hours and hours and just understand their world and the ways in which they think about possibilities. What we found is that a lot of them recognize their leadership potential, but the adults in their lives and the institutions such as schools and families don't always understand what they're expressing as a form of leadership and leadership characteristics. So girls of color, black girls, in particular, are often considered too sassy, too bossy, too outspoken. And rather than thinking about those as the core leadership characteristics that we might nurture for future leaders, we get in the way of young black girls. So the work that Elaine and I are working on is how do we convince the adults and leaders in the lives of these girls to get out of their way and allow them to lead?



 David Staley 26:03
Wendy Smooth, thank you.

 Wendy Smooth 26:05
Thank you, David, this was wonderful.

 Eva Dale 26:08
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