

# Widows, Congressional Representation, and the (Ms.)appropriation of a Name

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ABSTRACT. For much of the 20th century, widowhood was the primary path for women into the U.S. Congress. However, little is understood on how widows' gender, familial connections and name recognition widows acquire from their husbands may affect their political behavior. Drawing on insights from the literatures across American politics, comparative politics, and economics, we argue that widows in Congress will have an inherent name brand advantage, providing them more freedom to pursue their own policy agendas. Using a differences-in-differences analysis of legislative voting behavior from the 63rd to 104th Congresses, we provide evidence that widows are more liberal than their husbands and follow their own policy agendas. We also show that widows are more liberal than other women. Thus, our results indicate that widowhood embeds both the gender and the dynastic dimension of these legislators. Further evidence suggests that this difference is rooted in the name brand advantage that widows have compared to other women, highlighting the complementarity between these individuals' dynastic identity and their gender identity.

Although the 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote in 1920, women have been significantly underrepresented in the U.S. Congress. Following women's suffrage, the demographic composition of the average Congress throughout the rest of the 20th century was only 3.4% female. 43 of the first 178 women who entered Congress in the 20th century came from a single, specific group: widows of Congressmen who died while in office. For an extensive period of time, widowhood was one of the primary paths for women into the legislature, where 29 of the 67 women in Congress, before 1970, were widows. Yet, we still know relatively little about the role these widows played as female Congresspersons and individual legislators. Did widows serve in the shadow of their late husbands, voting and legislating just as he would have? Or did widows advance causes that were also championed by other women in Congress? In other words, to what extent did widows forge their own independent political identities, agendas, and legislative records? Answering these questions sheds light on the impact of dynastic representation, gender, and other issues on Congressional policy-making, as widows offer a unique opportunity to study the role of gender and familial relationships in politics, as well as better understand the potential "name brand advantage" certain legislators may have in Congress (see [Feinstein, 2010](#), 571).

While previous studies have reported widows to be more liberal than their husbands, a simple comparison confounds the effects associated with the unusual nature of succession (the use of special elections following a legislator's death). We use a differences-in-differences strategy to disentangle the effect of widowhood from the form of succession. In doing so, we find that districts in which a widow succeeds a dead Congressperson (that is, her late husband) see a significant liberal shift in the policy of the elected official, when compared to districts that experience anyone else succeeding a dead Congressperson. Furthermore, we find this shift is strongest along an interesting subset of policy issues that primarily address social and civil rights issues. As such, our study sheds light on the ongoing conversation regarding the definition of "women's issues" in Congress.

We also show that widows are more liberal than other women in Congress, suggesting that the liberal shift seen when a widow succeeds her husband is not driven purely by gender. By drilling down into the voting behavior of legislators on different types of issues, we find that (i) widows' leftward shift in voting behavior is driven by votes departing precisely on issues where other women's votes depart, but (ii) widows depart more strongly than other women - that is, they vote more liberal than other women on these issues. This suggests that widows may not differ ideologically from other women, but may have a louder vote. We further posit and provide evidence showing that these results can be interpreted through a model of office-motivated candidates who vary in their *valance*. Candidates with brand-name power (such as the name recognition enjoyed by widows) can more easily vote based on their own preferred policy, instead of those of the median voter. As such, our study highlights an important source of complementarity between the dynastic identity of these legislators and their gender identity: the dynastic identity helps make the widow's female voice louder.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. We first discuss the institutional setting and past research on widows in Congress. Then, we describe our model and our main theoretical predictions. We follow with a discussion of the dataset as well as methodology. Finally, we present our main results and conclusions, explaining the implications of our findings for the study of dynastic representation, gender identity within Congress, and the advantages afforded by the name recognition of certain legislators.

## WIDOWS IN CONGRESS

When a sitting member of the House of Representatives passes away, the U.S. Constitution and state law require the governor of the state to call for a special election to replace the vacant House seat.<sup>1</sup> The full election cycle must be followed including the political party nominating processes, primary elections, and a general election - all held in the congressional district involved. The entire process often takes as long as three to six months to complete. In 1923, three years after the

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<sup>1</sup> "When vacancies happen in the Representation from any State, the Executive Authority thereof shall issue Writs of Election to fill such Vacancies." – Article I, Section 2, Clause 4 of the U.S. Constitution.

Nineteenth Amendment legalized female suffrage throughout the country, a widow was nominated for the first time to run for election after her husband died. Ever since, widows became a popular candidate to replace a deceased Congressperson. Out of the 364 Representatives who died in office before 1976, 36 widows were nominated to run for Congress (see [Gertzog, 1995](#)). In our sample, we follow Congresspeople from the 63rd to the 104th Congresses, and we identify 34 widows who took over their dead husband's seat and an additional 378 vacancies due to death in office filled by non-widow replacers. Furthermore, we find that 61.76% of widows and the deceased husbands they replace are Democrats, while 55.12% of non-widow replacers are Democrats and 56.61% of dead Congresspersons not replaced by a widow are Democrats. We also find that non-widow replacers are much less likely to be female, as only 2.36% of non-widow replacers are women. Finally, we find that the succession of widows in Congress is more temporally spread out than one might initially presume. While 44% of our widows sample took office on or before the 80th Congress, we see that widows succeeded their husbands throughout our sample period.

Early studies on widows in Congress suggest that widows who replace their husbands in the House of Representatives are, on the whole, less educated and less qualified for political office than Congresswomen who gain office through regular means, ([Clubok et al., 1969](#); [Bullock III and Heys, 1972](#); [Kincaid, 1978](#)). More recent studies, however, challenge this assumption that these women are less qualified or politically astute ([Gertzog, 1980, 1995](#); [Palmer and Simon, 2003](#); [Fogarty et al., 2013](#)). Our analysis of widows from the 63rd to 104th Congresses finds there is little demographic evidence to suggest that widows are uneducated, as 70.59% of widows who replace their deceased husbands in the House are college educated compared with 84.78% of non-widow replacers, but this is substantially lower than the 92.08% of other women in Congress who are college educated.<sup>2</sup> Widows also appear to be older, on average, upon taking office (Mean = 54), when compared to the husbands they replace (Mean = 43), non-widow replacers (Mean = 45), and other women (Mean = 47).

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<sup>2</sup> Part of this difference could be due to changes in educational demographics within Congress and the broader U.S. population across time, particularly regarding the number of women attending colleges/universities.

Early research on widows in Congress also suggested that these women essentially served as placeholders for their husbands, holding little personal agency or political ambition of their own (Bullock III and Heys, 1972; Kincaid, 1978). More recent work lends limited support to this argument, as Southern widows are more likely to act as placeholders than non-Southern widows, when considering their length of Congressional service (Solowiej and Brunell, 2003).<sup>3</sup> Other research from outside of American politics finds that female dynastic or legacy mayors in the Philippines do not significantly differ in their policy preferences from their male dynastic counterparts, suggesting these individuals are “often figureheads of their relatives who constrain their decisions and remain, de facto, in power” (Labonne et al., 2016, 18). In contrast, Jalalzai and Hankinson (2008) find that widows in Congress are significantly more liberal and more likely to support women’s issues than the husbands they replace, especially when these women establish their own political careers.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, these results “challenge the assumption that widows do not have political identities separate from their husbands” (Jalalzai and Hankinson, 2008, 420).

When it comes to measures of political ambition, our analysis shows that only 47.06% of widows who replace their deceased husbands continue to serve in the same chamber after their initial term. Of those who leave office after this initial term, 70.59% left because they failed to seek re-election. In contrast, 81.89% of non-widow replacers continue to serve after the initial term, with only 30.98% of those who were not in the same chamber the next session leaving because they chose not to seek re-election. Widows who do seek re-election in the House of Representatives, however, continue to have political careers, with an average tenure length of 6.5 years. While this is shorter than the average tenure length of their deceased husbands (16.1 years), non-widow replacers (11.6 years), and other women (8.7 years), this shorter tenure length could be due, in part, to widows being older, on average, when they enter Congress. These statistics, therefore, indicate that widows who choose to run for re-election and win remain in the House across multiple Congresses.

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<sup>3</sup> Solowiej and Brunell (2003) note, however, that this does not mean that all Southern widows leave office quickly or serve as placeholders.

<sup>4</sup> Later in this study we consider the policy preferences of widows on “women’s issues,” while also discussing the disputed definition of this particular issue area.

While much of the literature on widows in Congress has been descriptive in nature, both a causal relationship as well as the mechanism behind these patterns are less well understood. Widowhood, however, is a rich environment to study as it embeds two important characteristics and how they interact: gender identity and family brand name. Indeed, much of the focus within this literature has centered on the gender identity of widows. Past work, for example, finds that widows are comparable to other women in Congress in their sponsorship of women's issue-specific bills or in their roll call participation (Bullock III and Heys, 1972; Wolbrecht, 2002), and that widows in Congress are more likely to support women's issues than the husbands they replace - especially after they establish their own political careers (Jalalzai and Hankinson, 2008).

Yet, current studies leave us with "a limited understanding of the role dynastic women play as policy-makers" (Labonne et al., 2016, 1), and we know little about how successors with familial ties behave in Congress (Solowiej and Brunell, 2003, 290). Addressing this issue, however, is critical to understanding the role successive representation has played in Congress, the broader effects of gender within Congress, and how the identity and experiences of legislators shape their decision-making (Burden, 2007; Lupton, 2017).

#### ARGUMENT AND HYPOTHESES: WIDOWHOOD AND THE NAME BRAND ADVANTAGE

We directly address this issue by examining the legislative voting behavior of widows in Congress. We argue that this dynastic connection affords widows name recognition that imbues them with key advantages in Congress, particularly regarding the freedom to pursue their own policy agendas. More generally, evidence from American politics indicates that individuals with familial or "dynastic" affiliations to other Congresspersons (either living or deceased) enjoy a substantial "name brand advantage" that makes them more attractive electoral candidates and more likely to be elected than opponents without these ties (Feinstein, 2010, 571). Dynastic representation in Congress is also "self-perpetuating," particularly regarding the legislative selection and nomination of candidates with familial or social ties to other representatives (Dal Bó et al., 2009). When it comes to re-election prospects, there is also some evidence that widows in Congress - especially

those tied to senior representatives - benefit from their former husbands' relationships with voters (Amundsen, 1971; Gertzog, 1995), allowing them to overcome many of the hurdles other female legislators face in establishing their legitimacy when running for office (Dodson, 2006). Furthermore, a plethora of evidence from comparative politics and across economics shows that these dynastic advantages are not limited to the American context. Cross-nationally, legislators with familial or dynastic connections within political institutions experience greater electoral success and a stronger bargaining position within their legislatures (Asako et al., 2015; Kauder and Potrafke, 2015; Daniele, 2015; Querubin, 2016; Folke et al., 2017; Smith and Martin, 2017). Thus, past research provides the foundation for our argument that widows may be at a distinct advantage, both electorally and within the legislature, especially when compared to other female political candidates or newly elected members of Congress.

Based on this research, therefore, we argue that widows will experience a significant name brand advantage based on their familial connections, and we further predict this advantage allows them more freedom in Congress in terms of their legislative voting behavior. Broader evidence from across studies of American political behavior lends further credence to our argument regarding the benefits widows may reap from this name brand advantage they inherit from their husbands. There is evidence that incumbents, more generally, enjoy similar electoral advantages, as voters are more familiar with these candidates (Goldenberg and Traugott, 1980; Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2003; Prior, 2006). Further evidence suggests that simply being able to recognize a candidate's name on a ballot imbues that candidate with an electoral advantage over one's competitors (Green et al., 2016).

In our study, we disentangle the impact of gender and family brand name on the policy preferences and legislative voting behavior of widows in Congress. To conceptually formalize these two dimensions (gender and family brand name), we follow the Calvert-Wittman candidate-location model, but allow for candidates to differ in their valence (following Groseclose, 2001). This allows them freedom in choosing which policies they implement. Candidate valence advantage comes from a number of sources, including superior character, charisma, intelligence, or name recognition - as

in the case of our widows. Notice that our goal is not to model the decision-making process of elected officials, which we take as exogenous, but to inform the reduced form models of our regression analysis. Indeed, name recognition among political candidates can help reduce the costs of running for office, while also increasing the probability of winning an election (Yen et al., 1992; Kam and Zechmeister, 2013). Thus, having a political name brand essentially serves as a way to reduce information costs to voters and to other legislators (Lott, 1986).

As there is little reason to have *a priori* assumptions of the true effect of widow representation, we describe a simple theoretical framework that provides motivation for the reduced form models of our regression analysis by making several assumptions about the nature and distribution of candidate characteristics. Consider a one-dimensional policy space, ranging from -1 to 1 (to reflect the structure of DW-Nominate scores). Each Congressional district has a continuum of voters whose policy positions are distributed around a median of  $\gamma_n \in [-1, 1]$ , with a standard deviation of  $\sigma_n$ . Therefore, the median voter in district  $n$  has an ideal policy of  $\gamma_n$ . An incumbent  $i$  representing district  $n$  has a preferred policy of  $\gamma_n + \epsilon_i$ , where  $\gamma_n$  is the preference of the median voter, and  $\epsilon_i$  is an idiosyncratic, individual-level random variable, from a symmetric distribution with mean 0, and variance  $\sigma^2$  (in other words, the incumbent is randomly selected from the distribution of voter preferences).

In the simplest median voter framework with purely office-motivated candidates, the candidate's preferred policy, and indeed the identity or characteristics of the incumbent, have no effect on policy; the elected official always implements the preferred policy of the median voter. Therefore, we consider the potential role of candidate valance. Assume some incumbents have *high valance*, while others have *low valance*. High valance incumbents are immune from electoral pressure and feel no need to appease voters. As such, an incumbent  $i$  in a district  $n$ , with a high valance, votes according to her preferred policy, i.e.,  $\gamma_n + \epsilon_i$ . In contrast, low-valance incumbents know that their re-election relies on their voting behavior, and therefore implement the preferred policy of the median voter. It follows that an incumbent  $i$  in an district  $n$ , with low valance, vote according to the median voter's preferred policy in her district, i.e.,  $\gamma_n$ . One of the predictions of the model



described by [Groseclose \(2001\)](#) is that, as an incumbent's valance advantage grows large, the incumbent will move in the direction of her ideal point.<sup>5</sup>

Widows differ from other incumbents in two ways. First, we assume that widows as a group differ in terms of their *ideology* from other incumbents, though we remain agnostic for now as to what is behind this difference. Since we are testing for a systematic difference between widows and otherwise identical incumbents, we introduce a common shock in widows' preferred policy. Widow  $i$  representing district  $n$  has a preferred policy of  $\gamma_n + \epsilon_w + \epsilon_i$ , where  $\epsilon_w$  is some common shock to all widows. Second, relying on previous evidence, such as that provided by [Dal Bó et al. \(2009\)](#) and [Feinstein \(2010\)](#), we assume that widows all have *high valance*, which comes from their high level of name recognition. Both assumptions are necessary to generate a difference between widows and other groups: if widows are, on average, no different than other incumbents, then we would expect no difference in policies chosen by widows and the husbands they replaced. Widows' high valance is one way to explain how we expect them to differ from other women (who do not enjoy the same name recognition, at least early in their political careers).

**Hypotheses.** We now move to our main predictions comparing widows to different groups, such as to Congresspeople who replaced a deceased Congressperson and to other Congresswomen:

*Hypothesis 1:* When compared to other Representatives who replace a dead Congressperson, the replacement of a dead Congressperson by a widow will lead to a change in the expected policy.

Suppose, Representative  $j$  is replaced by Representative  $k$  in district  $n$ . Representative  $j$  has a preferred policy of  $\gamma_n + \epsilon_j$ , while Representative  $k$  has a preferred policy of  $\gamma_n + \epsilon_k$ . What happens to the implemented policy when the identity of the Representative changes? Any single district  $n$  may experience a policy change when Representative  $k$  takes over the seat of Representative  $j$ . For example, let  $k$  be high valance and  $j$  low valance, the implemented policy will move from  $\gamma_n + \epsilon_k$  to  $\gamma_n$ . However, the *expected* change in policy is 0, since  $E[\epsilon_k] = 0$ . Since both Representative,

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<sup>5</sup> The model also predicts that, if the valance advantage is small, the incumbent will actually moderate her position. We assume that the name-brand and good will advantage of widows gives them a large valance advantage compared to other challengers and women.

regardless of their level of valance, have preferred policies that are drawn from a distribution centered about  $\gamma_n$ , the *expected* change in policy will be 0.

Assume now that the Congressperson  $j$  is replaced by his widow (who we will denote as Congressperson  $k$ ). The change in policy is either  $\epsilon_w + \epsilon_k - \epsilon_j$  (if  $j$  is high valance) or  $\epsilon_w + \epsilon_k$  (if  $j$  is low valance). In either case, the expected value of the change is  $\epsilon_w$ , since  $E[\epsilon_k] = E[\epsilon_j] = 0$ . Therefore, we expect districts that experience a widow succeeding her husband to experience, on average, a change in implemented policies, while districts that see a non-widow replace the deceased member to experience no change, or a very small change on average.

*Hypothesis 2:* Widows will engage in issue identification that will differ from that of their husbands and will be similar to that of other women in the House of Representatives.

If  $\epsilon_w$  is being driven by the widow's sex, as opposed to other observable or non-observable characteristics, we expect voting behavior on issues about which women are commonly identified to change. Any systematic difference between widows and non-widows could be related to a variety of characteristics of widows. While gender is an obvious factor, it is not the only possible explanation. To better understand the shift in policy behavior, we look at vote-level data to see on what issues widows are particularly likely to shift.

*Hypothesis 3:* Given their high valance, widows are more able to vote according to their preferred policy than are other women, even if they have a similar preferred policy.

Assume that women  $i$  has a preferred policy of  $\gamma_n + \epsilon_w + \epsilon_i$ , regardless of whether she is a widow. If she is a widow, her high level of valance will allow her to implement her preferred policy. For a random sample of widows, the expected policy will be  $\gamma_n + \epsilon_w$ . Assume further that a share  $\alpha \in (0, 1)$  of non-widow women are high valance, and therefore implement their preferred policy,  $\gamma_n + \epsilon_w + \epsilon_i$  and a share  $(1 - \alpha)$  are low valance, it follows that the expected policy implemented by non-widows women will be  $\alpha * E[\gamma_n + \epsilon_i + \epsilon_w] + (1 - \alpha) * E[\gamma_n] = \gamma_n + \alpha * \epsilon_w$ . Given  $\alpha \in (0, 1)$ , then some, but not all, women vote according to their preferred policies. This makes sense in a setting where some variation in valance exists; some incumbents face more pressure than others.

When compared to widows, other women will deviate from otherwise identical Representatives in the same direction, but with a lower intensity. If  $\epsilon_w < 0$ , the observed position of women will be more negative (within the  $[-1,1]$  policy space), but the position of widows will be more negative than other women. If  $\epsilon_w > 0$ , the opposite will be true.

## DATA & METHODOLOGY

To examine how the legislative behavior of widows in Congress differs from their husbands, other successors, and other women, we compare the behavior of these subgroups across multiple Congressional sessions in the House of Representatives. Our sample does not include the U.S. Senate for several reasons. First, very few widows succeeded their husband in the Senate. Second, and more importantly, replacements for deceased Senators are, in most states, selected by the governor instead of chosen via a special election (as in the House of Representatives). Thus, we focus on the House of Representatives. We draw our Congressional biographical data from McKibbin (ICPSR 7803) which covers all meetings between the 63rd Congress (1913-1915) and the 104th Congress (1995-1997). This dataset includes a variable that allows us to identify widows who succeeded their husbands, as well as other types of successors. We identify a total of 415 deaths in which a Representative died while in office and was replaced by a successor.<sup>6</sup> Of these, 34 were succeeded by their widows, while 378 were succeeded by someone else. Congressional voting behavior data is taken from Poole & Rosenthal, as we first employ DW-Nominate scores as the primary dependent variable.

**Methodology.** We first begin by using a basic OLS model to test for the differences across subgroups. We then look at the change in DW-Nominate scores when a widow succeeds her husband using a differences-in-differences specification analysis to disentangle the effect of widowhood from the confounding effects associated with the unusual nature of succession (the use of special elections following a legislator's death). We compare widow/husband pairings to a control group that consists of all non-widows who took over a seat from a person who died. This establishes

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<sup>6</sup> Out of these deaths, 412 of these representatives were men.

a useful counter-factual: we are comparing what happens when a widow replaces her husband to when anyone else replaces a deceased congressperson. Using a differences-in-differences approach, we can control for several factors that would otherwise bias our regressions. First, by looking at changes that take place within a Congressional district, we control for unobserved district characteristics, including voter preferences. Second, by comparing districts in which a widow succeeds her husband to districts in which anyone else succeeds a deceased Congressperson, we control for any political shifts due to the nature of succession. When a Congressperson dies in the middle of their term, they are often long-term incumbents, and their replacements are almost always first-time members of Congress, who face a different set of forces and challenges. Comparing widows to others who enter Congress in this way prevents the factors that shape voting behavior due to the nature of succession from biasing our estimates.

The sample across our analysis is all Congresspeople who died in office and everyone who replaced them, from the 63rd Congress to the 104th Congress. The treatment group is widow/husband pairs of Congresspeople, while the control group is everyone who died that was not replaced by their widow and the replacer themselves. The outcome variable is each legislator's DW-Nominate score, which is calculated across each Congress for each Representative. A total of 4,737 Congress/Representative pairs are observed from the sample. The following equation summarizes the regression we employ:

$$(1) \quad DWNom_{idt} = \beta_1 Treat_{id} + \beta_2 Post_t + \beta_3 Widow_{idt} + \beta X_{idt} + \eta_i + \rho_d + \epsilon_{i,d,t},$$

$DWNom_{idt}$  is the DW-Nominate score for Representative  $i$  in district  $d$  at time  $t$ .  $Treat_{id}$  is equal to 1 if the Representative is part of a widow/husband pair;  $Post_t$  is equal to 1 if the period observed is following the death of the Congressperson. Thus,  $Widow_{idt}$  is equal to 1 only in the post-death period in districts where a widow replaced her husband, and fully captures any shift in votes due to widows replacing their husbands (it is really a  $Treat \times Post$  interaction term. Therefore,  $\beta_3$  is our diff-in-diff estimator, capturing how the post-death shift in DW-Nominate scores differs between widows and non-widows.  $X_i$  is a set of Congressperson characteristics (age, party, and a college

education dummy variable).  $\eta_i$  is a full set of district fixed effects.<sup>7</sup>  $\rho_{i,t}$  is a district specific time-trend.<sup>8</sup> These additional controls are crucial for our identification strategy. Following the death of a Representative, a replacement is chosen through a special election. Therefore, selection is an issue; districts where a widow will choose to run and wins an election may simply be different than districts where widows are not elected. By including a full set of district fixed effects, we ensure that none of the results are being driven by selection across districts. By including a district specific time trend, we additionally control for any changes that are occurring within districts. Finally, standard errors are clustered at the state level.

## RESULTS

We first compare the DW-Nominate scores of different subgroups in our sample. Tables 1 and 2 present the regression-adjusted differences between male and female Representatives, widows and non-widow women, and widows and their husbands, respectively. These results are from an OLS regression with time and state fixed effects, party dummies, and age and education demographic variables. Standard errors are clustered at the state level. Column 1 of Table 1 shows the differ-

**Table 1.** Male/Female

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Women	-0.0583*** (0.00665)	-0.0438*** (0.00713)	-
Widow	-	-0.058*** (0.0168)	-0.109*** (0.00713)
Treatment	-	-	0.00826 (0.0116)
R-Squared	0.75	0.75	0.75
Observations	17,624	17,624	17,642
Place F.E.	State	State	State

\*\*\*p<0.01 \*\*p<0.05 \*p<0.1

Robust Standard Errors in parentheses

ence between all men and all women in the sample. In line with previous studies (Welch, 1985;

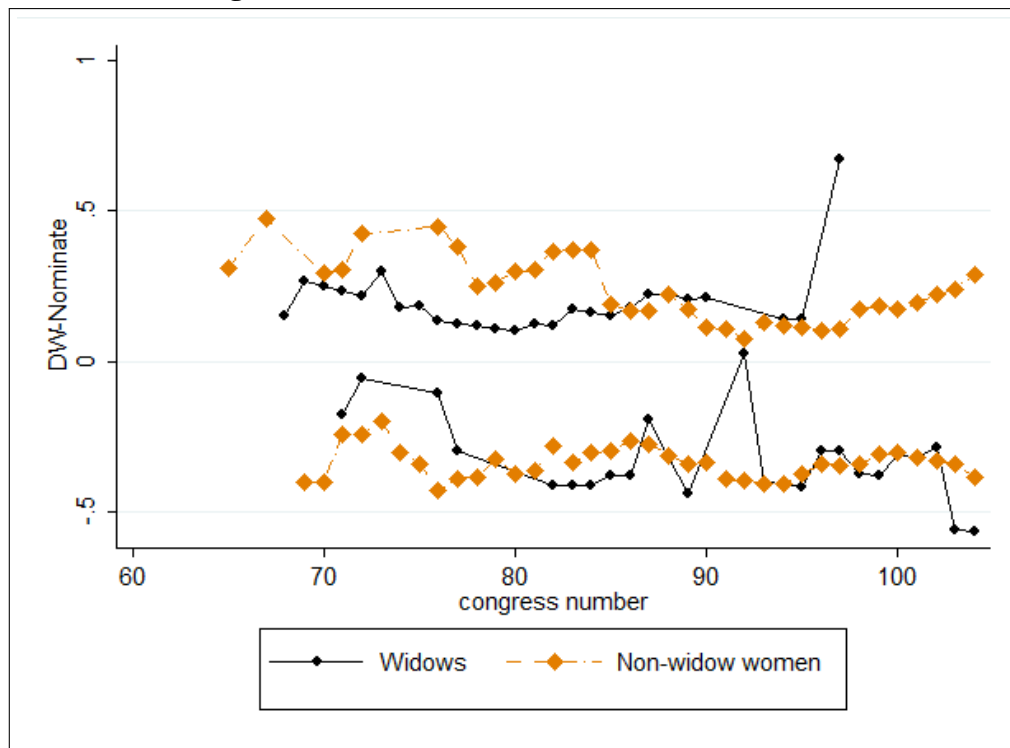
<sup>7</sup>We observe numerous deceased Representatives within the same district, so this is not co-linear with the *Treat* variable.

<sup>8</sup>We construct the trend as the years until the death of the incumbent.

Vega and Firestone, 1995; Swers, 2002; Poggione, 2004), we find a statistically significant difference between the behavior of women and men across the sample. Women have DW-nominate scores that are 0.058 points more negative than men, indicating women are more liberal in their positions. The standard deviation of the DW-Nominate variable is approximately 0.3 overall and 0.18 within a party. The difference between Republicans and Democrats is 0.57 points. Therefore, the difference between men and women is about 1/4 to 1/3 of the within-party variation in ideology and about 1/10 of the difference between parties. Next, Column 2 decomposes the effect of gender between widows and other women and shows that non-widow women are more liberal than other Representatives (with a coefficient of -0.043 points); yet, we also see that widows are significantly more liberal than non-widow women with DW-nominate scores that are 0.058 points more negative than other women and close to 0.1 points more negative than other representatives (the coefficient on widows is functionally an interaction term). Therefore, the difference between widows and others is about 1/2 of the within-party variation in ideology.

Figure 1 graphs the DW-Nominate scores for widows and non-widows across time for each of the two parties. We see that the difference between widows and non-widows is particularly pronounced for Representatives within the Republican party up to the 85th Congress (1957-1959). Across this period, widows are significantly more liberal than other women. For Democrats, early widows appear to vote more conservatively, but this difference is not very consistent across time. During the rest of the period of our sample, Democratic widows and non-widows fail to consistently vote differently, which is consistent with the regression results.

Table 2 compares widows and their husbands, controlling for the difference between male and female Representatives, including for all parties and for Republican and Democratic Representatives. Column 1 shows that widows have significantly more negative DW-Nominate scores than their husbands, even after controlling for the independent effect of gender. When we regress each party separately, several differences emerge. Both Republican and Democratic women have significantly more negative scores than men, but among widows, the negative shift is much stronger with Republican widows than with Democratic widows. Our results also show that, among the men

**Figure 1.** DW-Nominate, Widows and Other Women

who are replaced by their widows, Democratic men have more negative scores while Republican men more positive ones, meaning their voting behavior is more extreme than other Representatives, across both parties. These results raise several interesting issues, that we address further.

**Table 2.** Widows/Husbands, Controlling for sex

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Women	-0.0438*** (0.00713)	-0.0449*** (0.00793)	-0.0544*** (0.0119)
Widow	-0.0657*** (0.00202)	-0.00372 (0.0265)	-0.0948*** (0.0255)
Treatment	0.00786 (0.0116)	-0.0160 (0.0124)	0.0339*** (0.0169)
R-Squared	0.75	0.39	0.33
Observations	17,624	10,021	7,507
Party	ALL	DEM	REP

\*\*\*p<0.01 \*\*p<0.05 \*p<0.1

Robust Standard Errors in parentheses

We see that widows have more negative DW-nominate scores than their husbands, which supports *Hypothesis 1*. However, these regressions cannot be taken as estimating a causal effect as we are

not using a convincing counterfactual that will allow us to estimate how the voting behavior of districts represented by widows differed from what they would have experienced if a widow had not succeeded her husband. Therefore, we next use a differences-in-differences framework to compare the shift in voting behavior in districts that experience a widow succeeding her husband to those that see non-widows succeed a representative who dies in office.

**Diff-in-Diff Results.** The results up to this point are not unbiased estimates of the causal effect of being a widow on a Congressperson's position. Widows who take over following their husband's sudden death are elected in special elections and face a different set of circumstances than Congresspeople who are elected in the traditional way. To disentangle the effect of being a widow from the effect of taking over a seat in the middle of a term, we proceed with a differences-in-differences estimator, reported in Table 3.

Column 1 shows the results from a regression without demographic variables or time trends. The coefficient on *Treatment* shows the estimated difference between representatives who will ultimately be replaced by their widows, and every other Representative who dies in office. The coefficient shows that Representatives who are replaced by their widows have more conservative voting histories, even after controlling for political party. The coefficient on *Post* shows the shift in voting behavior that occurs when a deceased Representative is replaced by a non-widow. The coefficient evidences a small, but statistically significant, positive shift in DW-Nominate scores, though this result is not robust to alternative specifications.<sup>9</sup> Finally the coefficient on *Post \* Treat*, our variable of interest, shows that replacing a Representative with a widow leads to a negative shift of 0.114 point in DW-nominate scores. This shift is about 60% of the within-party standard deviation in DW-Nominate scores. These results inform the way we should view widows who entered Congress following the death of their husband and challenge the traditional view of the role widows play as legislators. Instead of being placeholders, widows represent, on average, a drastic shift in the policy positions taken by elected officials. In fact, a political party interested in maintaining the policy positions of the Congressperson who died would do better to NOT ask the widow to run.

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<sup>9</sup> It is also not robust to more conservative estimates of standard errors, such as clustering at the state level.



Column 2 shows that the results are robust to the inclusion of linear time trends. By controlling for trends, we make sure that the results are not being driven by pre-existing trends in the DW-Nominate scores between the treatment and control groups. As seen, the inclusion of these variables does cause the coefficients on *Treatment* and *Post* move significantly towards 0, and the coefficient of interest is almost unchanged. Column 3 includes a set of demographic characteristics. The results show that the observed difference between widows and their husbands cannot be attributed to demographic differences, even sex.

**Table 3.** Diff-In-Diff

VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treatment (=1)	0.0728*** (0.0157)	0.0493*** (0.0133)	0.0403*** (0.0135)
Post(=1)	0.0123** (0.00508)	0.00234 (0.00516)	-0.0114* (0.00657)
Widow (=1)	-0.114*** (0.0209)	-0.109*** (0.0173)	-0.138*** (0.0275)
College (=1)	-	-	-0.00553** (0.00216)
Age	-	-	-0.00109*** (0.000298)
Female(=1)	-	-	0.0395* (0.0219)
Distict F.E.	Y	Y	Y
Time F.E.	Y	Y	Y
Party Dummies	Y	Y	Y
Time Trends	N	Y	Y
Observations	4,737	4,737	4,737
R-squared	0.878	0.913	0.914

Robust standard errors in parentheses

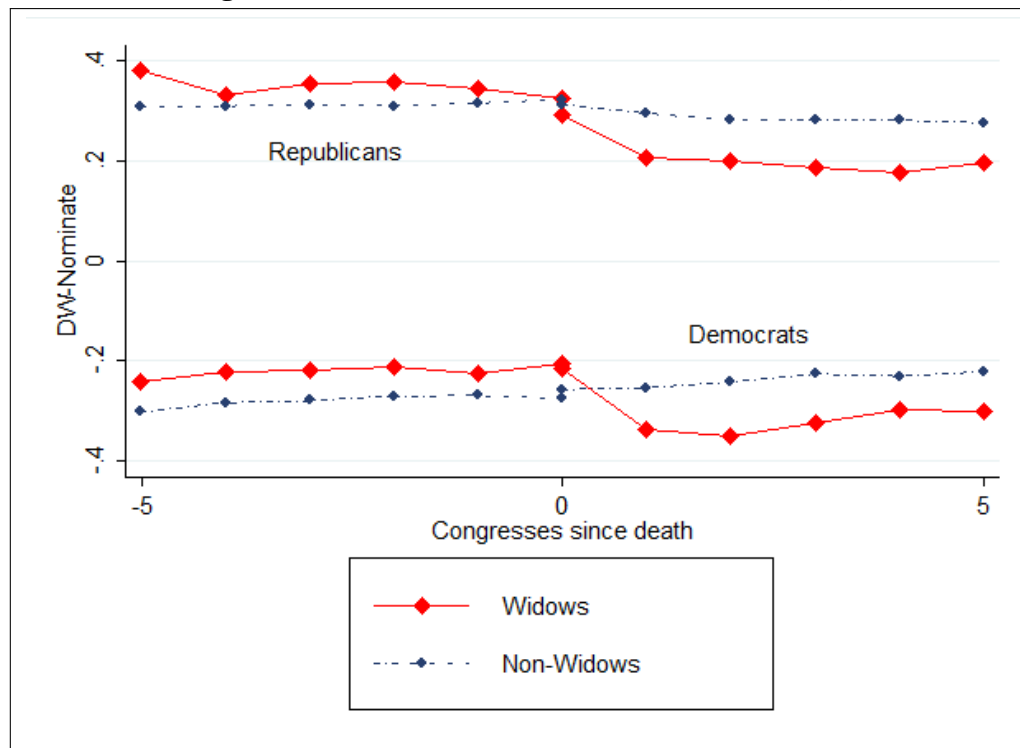
\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

The identifying assumption of the model is that group fixed effects capture time-invariant differences between Congresspeople who were replaced by their widows and people who were replaced by others and that the the group of non-widows who succeeded deceased Representatives, therefore, provide a suitable counterfactual. Since widows are found to be more liberal, as they have more negative DW-Nominate scores, we must consider the notion that widows were more likely

to be selected to succeed their husbands in districts that were becoming more liberal. In this case, widows would not be leading to a shift in policies, but simply continuing the trend. We test the assumption of parallel trends more formally by regressing the DW-nominate scores for our pre-treatment sample, with separate linear time trends for our treatment and control groups. We then test whether the coefficients on these trends are sufficiently different. We find that the F-statistics for the Wald test of identical coefficients is 0.15. We, therefore, cannot reject the hypothesis that treatment and non-treatment groups were following identical trends, which supports our identification strategy.

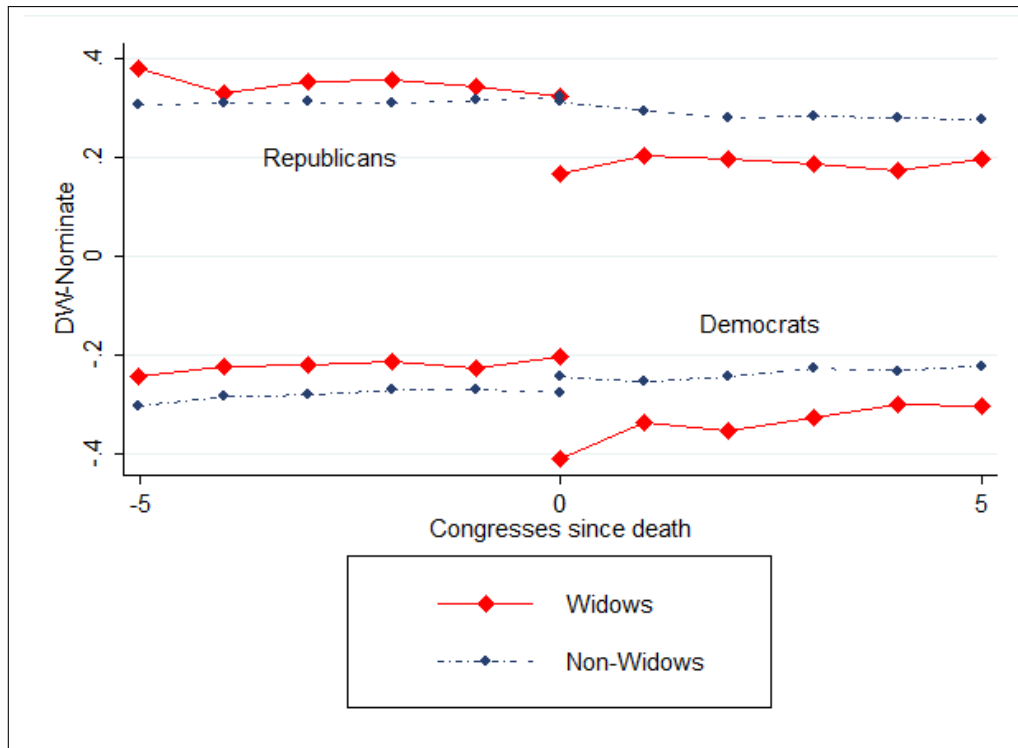
Figure 2 shows the trend in candidate behavior for the treatment and control groups, broken up by party. In considering the pre-death trends across treatment and control groups, no significant difference is observed. The parallel trends indicate that the treatment and control groups were experiencing similar time shocks in the years leading up to the death of the Congressperson. Additionally, these graphs also show that our results are not being driven by a regression to the mean. Since the men that widows replace are consistently more conservative than average, a regression to the party average could lead to different shifts for widows and non-widows. But our results show that Republican widows are replacing men who have identical scores to Congresspeople who are replaced by non-widows. For Democrats, non-widow replacers shift slightly in the opposite direction from widows. Both of these findings suggest that regression to the mean is not driving our estimates.

Figure 2 also illustrates the magnitude of the widow effect. When a person is replaced by a non-widow, very small changes in political policies occur. When widows replace their husbands, dramatic shifts in policy are observed. However, this jump is not seen until the Congress after the death. On average, widows continue the policy of their husbands until they are re-elected. Afterwards, however, widows certainly appear to follow their own policy agendas. The figure also shows that, even though the husbands in our treatment group have more positive DW-Nominate

**Figure 2.** DW-Nominate, Widows and Non-Widows (I)

scores than the control group, our results are not being driven by a reversion to the party average. The shift in policy positions between widows and non-widows is several times large than the difference between husbands and the control group.

Figure 3 is identical to Figure 2, but drops from the sample anyone who succeeded a death but did not successfully run for re-election. These “benchwarmers” were common, especially when the party did not have a candidate waiting in the wings. We now see that the jump in policy positions from husbands to widows is immediate. This finding supports previous literature: women who only serve out their husbands term are fundamentally different from those who seek and win re-election (Palmer and Simon, 2003). This difference is observable even in Congresses in which the transition occurs. This means that if one wanted to predict whether a widow would run for re-election after completing her husband’s term, they could successfully do so by simply observing her voting behavior, even during the term in which she replaces her husband. Women who will run for re-election break from the voting behavior of their husbands (evidencing a liberal shift for widows in both parties), while those who will not do so continue the behavior of their husbands.

**Figure 3.** DW-Nominate, Widows and Non-Widows (II)

**“Women’s Issues,” Widowhood, and Policy Preferences.** It is important to caution here that DW-nominate scores mean little without context. However, by comparing widows to other women, their husbands, and other Congresspeople who succeeded a mid-term death, we can understand the role that being a widow plays on the political stances and policy preferences of individual legislators. In particular, such an analysis can inform us of how widows voted in terms of policies that are typically associated with female legislators and how that behavior compares to other women and to the men they immediately succeeded. In doing so, we can better understand the impact of widowhood versus gender on Congressional policy positions.

If widows vote differently than other women, it is worth exploring whether they also vote differently on specific issues that are normally associated with women.<sup>10</sup> However, no straightforward definition of “women’s issues” exists (Volden et al., 2013, 2016). Typically, women’s issues are defined in terms of policy issues that are associated with the traditional role of women, issues over which women have experience, or issues important to women’s organizations (Swers, 1998). Yet,

<sup>10</sup> Women’s issues have remained the focus of scholars interested in the effects of widowhood on Congressional policy (Wolbrecht, 2002; Jalalzai and Hankinson, 2008).

the specific policy issues that fall into this category have changed over time and vary across scholars (Volden et al., 2016). In today’s context, education, healthcare, abortion and reproductive rights, as well as issues associated with discrimination have all been broadly classified as “women’s issues.” Despite this loose definition, there is a wealth of evidence indicating female legislators are more likely than their male counterparts to introduce and support legislation on these issues (Dodson, 2006; Gerrity et al., 2007; Frederick, 2011, 2015).<sup>11</sup>

DW-Nominate scores, however, are not issue specific, meaning that we cannot use them to determine if the liberal shift from having a widow in Congress is due to some policy issues more than others. Therefore, we use an alternative measure: whether a Congressperson voted the same as the liberal wing of a Congress. Using voteview data, which includes all Representative votes on all bills, we can explore which policy issues are driving this shift towards the liberal end of the political spectrum. To determine this, we take the votes of the 5% of Congresspersons with the most negative DW-Nominate score on the 1st dimension. We then create a binary variable equal to 1 if a Congressperson voted the same as the majority of this group, and 0 otherwise. We then estimate the effect using a linear probability model:

$$(2) \quad Match_{idt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Treat_{id} + \beta_2 Post_t + \beta_3 Widow_{idt} + \beta X_{idt} + \eta_i + \rho_d + \epsilon_{idt}$$

Where  $Match_{dc}$  is equal to 1 if the Representative in district  $d$  during Congress  $c$  voted with the liberal wing.  $Treatment_d$  is equal to 1 if the district is represented a widow or her husband (our treatment group).  $Post_c$  is equal to 1 if the vote was by a person who replaced a dead Congressperson.  $Post*Treatment_{cd}$  is the interaction term between treatment groups and post-treatment time.  $\beta_3$  is therefore the coefficient that captures the causal effect of a widow replacing her husband, relative to the voting behavior of other replacers. The sample is restricted to the votes of every Congressperson who died during a term and their immediate successor.

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<sup>11</sup> See also Vega and Firestone (1995); Norton (1999); Swers (1998, 2001, 2002). Other work shows that the positive impact of female legislators on women’s issues not just limited to the U.S. (Tremblay, 1998; Lovenduski and Norris, 2003; Taylor-Robinson and Heath, 2003; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006).

Examining votes on all issues, as seen in Table 4, we find that being replaced by a widow leads to a 3 percentage point increase in the probability that a representative votes with the liberal wing. Compared to a mean of 0.668, this represents a 4.5% change. For comparison, 0.03 is 1/11 of the difference between the two parties. The causal effect is significant for both parties, but much larger for Republican widows (0.051 compared with 0.0239). These results provide an important validation of our match variable. We know from the regressions using DW-Nominate scores that widows voting is more liberal, and the results shown in Table 4 reflect this. Using the DW-nominate issue

**Table 4.** Diff-in-Diff: Vote-Level Data

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treatment (=1)	-0.0186*** (0.00300)	0.0239*** (0.00375)	-0.0510*** (0.00626)
Post (=1)	-0.00702*** (0.00144)	-0.0155*** (0.00175)	0.0163*** (0.00288)
Widow (=1)	0.0301*** (0.00383)	0.0185*** (0.00428)	0.0549*** (0.00870)
District & year fixed effects, party dummies and linear trends included			
R-squared	0.163	0.092	0.057
Observations	1,145,572	711,687	433,289
Sample	ALL	DEM	REP

Robust Standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\*p<0.01 \*\*p<0.05 \*p<0.1

codes (which classifies a vote according to one of 109 distinct issue codes), we estimate the effect of a widow replacing her husband on her voting for each issue. In doing so, we investigate whether the observed liberal shift in voting behavior of widows is being driven by some issues more than others. Table 5 shows the diff-in-diff results for all issues for which we observed a sufficient number of votes (1,000) where we saw a large, statistically significant effect.<sup>12</sup> Given the large number of issue categories, some variation and even significant outliers are likely. But we find that the issues on which widows votes experience a large shift are more likely to be social issues, including women's equality (0.224), Unemployment/Jobs (0.0.807), Civil Rights (0.143), Immigration (0.114), and Workplace Conditions (0.128). Most of these issues are areas that previous literature

<sup>12</sup> We defined this as point estimates of 0.06 (about twice the overall point estimate) and significant at the 5% level.

has identified as the subject of specialization by female Representatives. For example, [Volden et al. \(2016\)](#) find that women in Congress are more likely to introduce bills on civil rights/liberties, immigration, employment, and law, crime, and family. We do not find, however, that widows vote differently on other issues often associated with women, most prominently health and education issues ([Volden et al., 2016](#)). Conversely, we also see that widows vote more liberally on issues that are not traditionally viewed as “women’s issues.”<sup>13</sup> These results hint at the numerous ways that Representatives can distinguish themselves with regard to specific issues: they may take leadership roles or seats on committees, introduce legislation, or as we see in our results, in the political leanings of their voting behavior itself.

**Table 5.** Diff-in-Diff: Issues

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Treatment(=1)	-0.0331 (0.0536)	-0.0983*** (0.0235)	-0.0737*** (0.0226)	-0.0237 (0.0429)	0.00460 (0.0302)	-0.0695 (0.0482)	-0.0703* (0.0370)
Post(=1)	0.0294 (0.0275)	0.0230** (0.0101)	-0.0128 (0.0106)	0.0198 (0.0146)	-0.0241 (0.0150)	0.0394* (0.0208)	-3.72e-05 (0.0182)
Widow	0.224*** (0.0693)	0.0807*** (0.0271)	0.143*** (0.0284)	0.106** (0.0522)	0.114*** (0.0422)	0.128** (0.0621)	0.200*** (0.0491)
District & year fixed effects, party dummies and linear trends included							
R-squared	0.395	0.342	0.395	0.724	0.241	0.306	0.289
Observations	3,964	21,651	19,121	4,433	11,548	3,343	7,063
Issue	Women’s Equality	Unemployment	Civil Rights	Disputed Elections	Immigration	Workplace Conditions	Interstate Commerce

Robust Standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\*p<0.01 \*\*p<0.05 \*p<0.1

These results are also robust to alternative definitions of issues. For example, we also use Clausen codes, which categorize a larger percentage of all votes into a issue code, but only identifies 5 issues. Of these issues, we find that the liberal shift from having a widow succeed her husband is strongest on votes over issues of civil liberties.<sup>14</sup> These results agree that the leftward shift observed when a widow succeeds her husband is stronger on social policies.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of whether gender-neutral issues can be viewed as “women’s issues,” (see [Warren, 2002](#)).

<sup>14</sup> The other issue areas identified in the Clausen codes are government management, social welfare, agriculture, and foreign and defense policy.

These findings indicate that, when a widow replaces her husband, it results in a liberal shift in voting and that this shift is especially large on certain social issues, including women’s equality, civil rights, and immigration, consistent with *Hypothesis 2*. But how does the voting behavior of widows compare to that of other women, especially on these issues? The coefficient on *Female* in Table 6 shows the difference in voting behavior between men and non-widow women. Column 1 shows the results when all issues are pooled, and Column 2 shows the results for the issues identified in Table 5. For all issues, we see that non-widow women are more likely than men to vote with the liberal wing, but they are even more likely to do so on the issues identified above. Therefore, the issues which drive the liberal shift in voting by widows are issues that other women are more likely to lean towards the left.

The coefficient on *Widows* compares widows to other women, as it is functionally an interaction term. As seen in Column 1, on all issues, widows are more likely to vote with the liberal wing than other women. This difference is small (1.2 percentage points) compared with the difference between other women and men. When we look just at the issues about which widows were especially likely to deviate, the difference between widows and other women grows instead of converging. Widows are 4.8 percentage points more likely than other women to vote with the liberal wing, even though the difference between women and men has grown as well. Widows and other women are deviating from other Representatives along the same issues (as predicted by *Hypothesis 2*), but the magnitude of the difference for widows is greater than for other women. These results suggest that widows’ status as women does not fully explain why they are especially likely to deviate on these sets of issues.

**Table 6.** Widows/Other Women

	(1)	(2)
Female (=1)	0.0324*** (0.000920)	0.0487*** (0.00394)
Widow (=1)	0.0119*** (0.00224)	0.0482*** (0.00955)
R-Squared	0.15	0.17
Observations	6,789,148	389,777
SAMPLE	All Issues	Table 5 Issues

\*\*\*p<0.01 \*\*p<0.05 \*p<0.1



Instead, these results may stem from the the lack of electoral pressure widows face. Representatives have strong incentives to vote strategically, and more junior representatives (who are more likely to be female) may be hesitant to vote independently for fear of being identified too strongly with any one particular issue issue. Widows, however, may be more immune to this pressure, as they come into office with pre-existing name recognition. This political capital that their name recognition affords them may allow widows to be more supportive of these causes than other women.

If widows arrive in Congress with political capital or goodwill, they may be less constrained from voting in ways that less well-connected Congresspeople are. Widows certainly appear to face reduced electoral pressure: all of the widows who chose to run for re-election in the Congress after they succeeded their husband won the election. Therefore, they may be more free to vote according to their preferred policy, especially if doing so means breaking from the party. The intuition here is similar to the model described by [Anzia and Berry \(2011\)](#). In their model, women face discrimination by voters, so only highly qualified women would win elections and enter Congress. Widows, who carry name recognition, do not encounter such discrimination and, therefore, are more likely to gain entrance into Congress. In the setting we are studying, the lack of discrimination by voters or colleagues allows widows to more easily advance issues without facing as severe a threat as other women in losing their re-election or alienating other Congresspeople.

In the theoretical section, we hypothesized that widows may be particularly able to vote according to their bliss point, instead of that of the median voter. Therefore, even if widows and other women have identical bliss points, we may still observe a difference in voting behavior. Additionally, as the bliss point moves further away from that of other Representatives (as in the case of the subset of issues in [Table 5](#)), the difference between widows and other women may grow.

One indirect way to test this claim is to split our sample of widows on the vote share of the husband before he died. If widows' behavior is being influenced by electoral freedom, we would expect widows whose husbands faced less electoral pressure to behave differently than those whose husbands faced strong challengers. Using our primary diff-in-diff specification, we re-estimate the effect for 2 groups: widows whose husbands won their final election with more than two-thirds

of the vote (low electoral pressure) and those who won with less (high pressure). The results are shown in Table 7. The point estimate for the low pressure group is -0.131, while the point estimate for the high-pressure group is -0.0769. This means when a district sees a widow take over in a low pressure environment, they experience a larger liberal shift in voting than in a high-pressure environment. This finding is consistent with *Hypothesis 3*, that the relative freedom from electoral pressure allows widows to deviate from prior policy, but is not a direct test of causal effect. Widows or husbands in a low-pressure environment may have different preferred policies than those in high-pressure environments. What the results clearly show, along with the results in Table 6, is that the change in voting behavior that occurs when a widow takes a seat in the House of Representatives cannot be explained simply by gender.

**Table 7.** Diff-in-Diff by Electoral Pressure

	(1)	(2)
Treatment (=1)	-0.0766 (0.0773)	0.127** (0.0563)
Post (=1)	0.0142 (0.0127)	0.0136 (0.0127)
Widow (=1)	-0.0769* (0.00407)	-0.131** (0.00559)
District & year fixed effects, party dummies and linear trends included		
R-squared	0.88	0.88
Observations	4,472	4,632
Sample	High Pressure	Low Pressure

Robust Standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\*p<0.01 \*\*p<0.05 \*p<0.1

## CONCLUSION

In studying the role of widows in the House of Representatives, we have found that the voting behavior of widows is inconsistent with median voters models where electoral pressure leads incumbents to converge to the preferred policy of the median voter. When widows succeed their deceased husbands, they engage in more liberal voting patterns on legislation. This stands in sharp

contrast to other legislators who succeed Representatives who die in office. When a deceased Representative is replaced by anyone but their own widow, no change in policy occurs.

By looking at all votes on the floor in the House of Representatives, we find that the liberal shift observed in widows' behavior is driving by small subset of issues. These issues are primarily clustered in the fields of Civil Rights and similar social issues, which suggest that widows engage in issue specialization that is very similar to other female Representatives. We find that other (non-widow) women diverge from their male counterparts especially on these issues. Therefore, the history of widows in Congress is not simply one of dutiful family members fulfilling the visions of their late husbands, but of women using their unique position of affect policy.

Finally, we see that, although widows appear to engage in similar issue identification as other women, their voting patterns do not converge. Widows are more likely than other women to vote with the liberal wing of the House of Representatives, but are more likely still to vote with the liberal wing on the issues where they diverge most from their husbands. While the direction of the policy shift is the same for widows and non-widowed women, the shift for widows is stronger. This finding is consistent with models of candidate valence, where incumbents who face less electoral pressure (such as incumbents with the brand-name advantage of widows) are more easily able to vote in accordance with their most preferred policy, instead of bending to party or electoral pressure.

The importance of understanding the role of widows in Congress extends beyond historical interest. Understanding how salient characteristics of legislators, especially their personal characteristics or individual backgrounds, affects their decision-making is of critical importance for researchers and policy-makers. The case of widows is made more interesting by their name recognition. Most first-term Representatives have little influence and face a higher likelihood of losing a re-election campaign than other incumbents. This is likely even more true for under-represented groups such as women. Widows faced little electoral pressure,<sup>15</sup> and therefore they represent a unique phenomenon in U.S. political history: members of a marginalized group within Congress who held

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<sup>15</sup> If they ran for re-election, a win was almost certain.

especially high levels of valance. That they used this valance to push issues of importance to other women in Congress suggests that gender, and not some other factor of widowhood, influenced their decision-making.

Looking forward, therefore, our study brings up three particularly interesting avenues of future research. First, our study calls into question what constitutes a “women’s issue” and the extent to which female legislators with different personal backgrounds are interested in these issues. While we find that widows are more liberal on a subset of issues traditionally identified as of concern to female legislators, widows also diverge substantially on other key policy areas. Future research, therefore, should continue to disentangle this connection between gender, other legislator characteristics, and policy preferences on key issue areas. Second, scholars should build upon our study to further examine how the behavior of widows differs in other domains, such as committee assignments and bill sponsorship (Jalalzai and Hankinson, 2008). Finally, our argument and findings suggest that scholars need to further examine which legislators and electoral candidates benefit from name recognition and name brand advantages both when running for office and once in Congress. While there is evidence that incumbents benefit substantially from this phenomenon, our findings indicate that Congressional relationships also impact which candidates can capitalize on this advantage.<sup>16</sup> In other words, we need to continue to consider how the personal characteristics and relationships of legislators and electoral candidates can impact their policy preferences, legislative behavior, and electoral prospects.

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<sup>16</sup> Future experimental work, for example, could further address the potential electoral advantage of widows who run for re-election to separate the impact of their incumbency (loosely defined), gender identity, and familial relationships on their electoral appeal.

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