

ALTERING SINGLE MOTHER REPRESENTATION IN THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS

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23% of the United States population under 18 lived in single parent households in 2019, a widespread phenomenon compared with the global average of 7% (Kramer, 2019).¹ These single parent households are often poorer than married parent households, with single mothers in particular facing higher levels of poverty than single fathers (Livingston, 2018)² and “greater exposure to ongoing financial strain, stresses of caregiving and other sources of stress than other mothers” (Atkins, 2010).³ Given these challenges, has Congress, the federal body legislating single mothers’ socio-economic protections, adequately represented single mother legislative interests or is more effective representation needed to pass beneficial policies? To effectively answer this question, we must recognize that Congress members are disproportionately male (Congressional Research Service, 2022),⁴ limiting their shared experiences, and thus advocacy for single mothers (Lowande et al, 2019).⁵ If single mothers wish to enter Congress, they face numerous obstacles. Many simply cannot afford to run (Sanbonmatsu, 2020),⁶ and voters tend to not trust them due to expectations that they are unable to balance taking care of their children with running for Congress (Barbara Lee Foundation, 2019).⁷ Congress has already made efforts to financially aid single mothers by implementing the child tax credit, which decreases the tax

¹ Stephanie Kramer works for Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan research organization, and has received a PhD on sociology from the University of Oregon.

² Gretchen Livingston was a senior researcher for Pew Research Center with a PhD in sociology from the University of Pennsylvania before working at Pew for 13 years.

³ An Assistant Professor at The College of New Jersey’s School of Nursing, Dr. Rahshida Atkins (with a Rutgers PhD) conducts scholarly research on health issues for impoverished communities.

⁴ The Congressional Research Service is a nonpartisan governmental entity which informs congressional committees and members of congress with factual information.

⁵ Kenneth Lowande is a Political Science Professor at the University of Michigan, Melinda Ritchie was formerly a Political Science Professor at University of California, Riverside, and Erin Lauterbach was a PhD student at University of California, Riverside in American politics.

⁶ Kira Sanbonmatsu works at Rutgers University as a political science professor and has been published in numerous academic journals including *Politics & Gender*.

⁷ The Barbara Lee Family Foundation is a nonprofit researching women’s representation in American Politics.

burden for single mothers to help pay for their children's childcare (Quinn & Cahill, 2017).⁸ However, it took an actual single mother in Congress, Katie Porter, to recognize that single mothers making above \$112,500, the income threshold for the current credit (IRS, 2021),⁹ should still be able to benefit due to the high childcare costs Porter herself has faced (Carrazana, 2021).¹⁰ Thus, Porter proposed H.R. 3216 combating this issue (Porter, 2021).¹¹ Porter also proposed the Help America Run Act which permits first-time candidates to use campaign funds to help pay for childcare while running for Congress (Porter, 2019). After examining the status and effectiveness of single mother representation in Congress, it is clear that single mothers deserve more explicit representation enabled by the Help America Run Act, which should be reintroduced as a standalone bill and passed by Congress.

Single Mother Struggles

According to Pew Research, the number of single parents in the United States (roughly 25%) has more than tripled from 1968 to 2017 (Livingston, 2018). These single parents are disproportionately women, with “ages 35 to 59 in the U.S. ... more likely than men in the same age group to live as single parents (9% vs. 2%)” (Kramer, 2019). Additionally, single mothers face higher levels of poverty (30%) than their male counterparts (17%) (Livingston, 2018). In response to these conditions, policymakers have utilized the child tax credit to provide needed financial relief to single mothers. This policy allows parents to decrease the amount they pay in taxes based on the number of children and level of income (IRS, 2021). According to a 2015 United States Department of Agriculture study, “because single-parent families have one less

⁸ Joseph Quinn works at the Department of Economics with Kevin Cahill at the Center on Aging & Work at Boston College.

⁹ The IRS, or Internal Revenue Service, is the official governmental organization which collects taxes on behalf of the US government.

¹⁰ Chabeli Carrazana reports on the economy for The 19th, a nonprofit news organization with a focus on gender and politics.

¹¹ Katie Porter is a Congresswoman and single mother representing Irvine, California.

potential earner, their total household income is lower [than typical married-couples] and child-rearing expenses consume a greater percentage of income,” increasing their dependence on the child tax credit (Lino et al, 2017).¹² These conclusions suggest that Congress should intervene to increase protections for single mothers; however, it must first be determined if greater representation of single mothers is needed for this to occur.

Merits of Representation

To examine whether greater representation of single mothers in Congress is needed, we must first explore the effectiveness of minority or disadvantaged group representation in Congress. Michele L. Swers, a Georgetown University government professor who has analyzed women in Congress, notes that “As women and often as mothers, female officeholders bring a different perspective to the deliberative process ... [and are] focusing more policy attention on ... single mothers in poverty” (Swers, 2016). The notion that Congresswomen typically better represent the interests of single mothers than Congressmen is bolstered by the finding that Congress members are more likely to advocate for those who share their background, both publicly and privately (Lowande et al, 2019). Furthermore, Congresswomen contacted federal agencies on behalf of women constituents 8% more than Congressmen (Lowande et al, 2019). This is particularly consequential given that the interests of single mothers are often ignored during the “implementation stage of policymaking” where federal agencies direct resources allocated to a particular interest group, in this case single mothers (Lowande et al, 2019).

Currently, a small, bipartisan cohort of single mothers are Congresswomen, including Democrat Katie Porter (Porter, 2021; Mace, 2021).¹³ Porter introduced H.R. 3216 in her 2nd term, increasing the amount of money single parents could make to qualify for the child tax

¹² Mark Lino works for the United States Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service, an official governmental agency working to end hunger in the United States.

¹³ Nancy Mace is a Congresswoman and single mother representing Charleston, South Carolina.

credit from \$112,500 to \$150,000, the same as a married couple (Porter et al, 2021). This legislation would critically benefit single mothers, given that the child tax credit policy has already shown to be “well targeted towards the poor and near-poor because eligibility depends on family income” (Quinn & Cahill, 2017). These policy proposals appear to be motivated by her life experiences as she described how “I can’t afford to have him [my son] here [at home] every hour of every day ... I don’t have the resources,” Porter said (Carrazana, 2021). However, not all single mother Congresswomen support Porter’s legislation. Republican Nancy Mace did not cosponsor H.R.3216, nor did any Republican member of Congress (Porter et al, 2021). Furthermore, many prominent cosponsors of Porter’s bill were not single mothers but fellow Democrats (Porter et al, 2021). Given the increasing political polarization between the parties and that more congressional women are Democrats than Republicans, increasing single mother representation alone is unlikely to increase bipartisan support for social welfare policies which are more commonly advocated by Democrats (Swers, 2016). Despite this, single mother congressional representation clearly increases legislative advocacy for other single mothers, but they face many social and financial struggles to get there.

Electoral Challenges

Compared to other representative democracies, women legislators are more underrepresented (23.7 to 24% in 2019) in America than in the rest of the world (De Simone, 2020).¹⁴ This is partially due to single-member congressional districts and a lack of term limits, both restricting the number of races for women, particularly single mothers, to enter (Sanbonmatsu, 2020). Given their lower financial wealth, both compared to other women and men, single mothers struggle to obtain the monetary resources to run (Atkins, 2010);

¹⁴ Daniel De Simone communications director for the Center for American Women and Politics, part of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

Sanbonmatsu, 2020). A study from the Barbara Lee Foundation also found that “a solid majority of voters say they have modest, serious, or very serious doubts about the single mother’s ability to do the job,” more than married mothers and single women, who already attract scrutiny from voters (Barbara Lee Foundation, 2019). Given these social and financial challenges, the U.S government must aid single mothers in their congressional campaigns.

Solution

To increase single mother representation in Congress, the legislative branch should pass the Help America Run Act reintroduced by Congresswoman Porter. This legislation permits child care and health insurance to be classified as campaign committee expenditures (campaign committees pool campaign donations required for congressional races) which decreases the amount of income needed for single mothers to run while still providing for their children (Porter, 2019). Considering that the average House candidate spends roughly \$2 million in a winning campaign and that single mothers face immense socio-economic challenges when running for office, this bill’s ability to decrease the amount of fundraising needed for single mothers - allowing them to run while meeting basic expenses - has the potential to be transformational (Evers-Hillstrom, 2019;¹⁵ Barbara Lee Foundation, 2019). The Help America Run Act was already passed with bipartisan support in the House before being incorporated into the For the People Act, a large voting rights bill which passed the House but failed in the more conservative Senate (Porter, 2019; Sarbanes, 2021;¹⁶ Slodysko et al, 2021).¹⁷ However, the proven bipartisan support of Porter’s specific provisions suggests it could pass as a standalone

¹⁵ Karl Evers-Hillstrom worked for OpenSecrets, a national nonpartisan, nonprofit organization tracking money in US politics, until June 2021.

¹⁶ John Sarbanes is a Congressman representing Maryland.

¹⁷ The Associated Press is a collection of prominent American journalistic organizations who report factual news on a daily basis.

bill. As single mothers continue to suffer from chronic poverty, it is time to uplift them and pass this critical legislation.

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