Introduction

Gender inequality in political representation threatens a representative democracy in the United States. Although the number of women politicians at all levels of government has been increasing since the 1970s, progress has stalled in the twenty-first century. Nationwide, women make up only about one-quarter of state legislators (Center for American Women and Politics [CAWP] 2017). This inequity impacts the legislative process (Pearson and Dancey 2011; Swers 2013) and has broader effects on girls’ political interest and knowledge (D. Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006). One answer to the puzzle of women’s stalled progress in political representation may lie at the nexus of public officials’ socially interrelated (Carroll 1989) political work and home lives.

Research on the changing institutions of work and family have proliferated alongside the influence of feminist scholarship in sociology (Coltrane and Adams 2008; Ferree 2010). Gender as a category of analysis (Scott 1986) has motivated research that looks beyond separate spheres (Ferree 1990) of work and family and analyzes the interactive nature of these aspects of social life. Yet, when scholars discuss the intersection of work and family, the focus is often placed on the way work and family conflict or enrich one another (Greenhaus and Powell 2006). In this regard, separate categories persist in modern scholarship on work and family (for a review, see Wharton 2012). Given the rising number of people in non-standard employment (Kalleberg 2000; Mullaney and Shope 2012), a constitutive perspective of social life in which work and family may blend is a needed advancement. In response, this study considers the nearly unpaid labor of state representatives in a volunteer state legislature as an analytically distinct form of political work. In many ways, labor in less professionalized legislatures is more like volunteerism than traditional work, which is juggled simultaneously with family commitments and in many cases, paid employment.

For context, U.S. state legislatures are highly variegated in terms of professionalization. There are two main “types” of professionalization that exist in state legislatures:

1. Political representation takes several different forms (Dovi 2008); in this study, we focus on family factors that interact with the descriptive representation of women (Pitkin 1967).

Keywords

gender, work and family, state legislatures, institutions, emotions
legislatures in the United States: full-time, “professional” and part-time, “citizen” legislatures. However, professionalization is truly a spectrum; the National Conference of State Legislatures classifies only 10 states as true professional legislatures, and 16 are considered part-time legislatures. Thus, the majority of state legislative bodies lie somewhere in between “professional” and “volunteer” (National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL] 2014). In this study, a citizen legislature was selected to serve as the site for studying work-family conflict and coping mechanisms. Notably, part-time legislatures have lower barriers to entry and have historically better represented women (Reingold 2012), and we would expect experiences of conflict to be exacerbated among legislators in professionalized institutions.

Gendering Legislative Life and Political Work

The political arena is a theoretically interesting area of study in relation to gender and the sociology of work. In 1981, when Alan Rosenthal published his comprehensive book on Legislative Life, women legislators were too small a group to warrant mention. Since then, research on women’s continued underrepresentation in U.S. politics has emphasized the supply and demand side of electoral politics (Paxton, Kunovich, and Hughes 2007). For instance, Lawless and Fox (2010) attribute women’s underrepresentation primarily to insufficient numbers of women in the political pipeline. Yet, few inroads have been made to analyze the social structure of gender (Risman 2004) with respect to political work and legislators’ lives.

Studies addressing the intersection of politicians’ “public and private lives” (C. S. Rosenthal 2001) often focus on sex difference and gender as a category (Ray 2006). These studies provide key insights into factors “in the way of women” (Mackay 2001) serving in public office. Following broader research on the gendered division of labor, Thomas, Herrick, and Braunstein (2002) find that women legislators are more likely to hold primary responsibility for family matters than their male peers. Relatedly, R. Campbell and Childs (2014) argue for a reconfiguration of political life to accommodate mothers—a subcategory underrepresented among women MPs in the UK parliament. From a more social-structural perspective, Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013:45) draw attention to the “relationally embedded decisions,” shaped by gender through social relationships, women make to pursue political candidacy. In this article, we analyze volunteer legislators’ work-family conflict through the lens of gender as a social structure (Risman 2004) that constrains and reinforces inequality in legislative life.

This study contributes to literature on the sociology of work by capturing the unique traits of volunteer political work as work and the relationship this kind of labor has with family obligations. Volunteering, broadly defined, is any activity in which time is given freely to benefit others. Over one-half of the U.S. population engages in volunteerism of some kind each year (Wilson 2000). A study of citizen legislators can be considered a negative case (Emigh 1997) because theories of work and family do not encompass voluntary political work, such as that done by state representatives in a volunteer legislature.

The sociology of work focuses almost exclusively on paid labor, not on “meaningful work” (Steger, Dik, and Duffy 2012) done in the service of others. Nevertheless, volunteerism may be pursued as a vocation (Roth 2015) and is associated with affective benefits that may go unrecognized given the lack of pay in volunteer work (Thoits and Hewitt 2001). Moreover, research on work and family has historically analyzed these “spheres” separately; yet, volunteers may have more opportunities to perform civic work and family duties simultaneously compared to jobs performed in traditional workplace settings. Drawing on conceptualizations of time as a social experience (Mullaney and Shope 2012; Zerubavel 1979) and theories of coping (Folkman and Lazarus 1980;Thoits 1995), this study explores the boundaries, or lack thereof, volunteer legislators navigate between their legislative and family lives and the way gender informs how they cope with their time-based commitments.

Participants and Methods

This study is based on semi-structured interviews with citizen legislators collected over the summer and fall of 2014. The sample was collected from a large volunteer state legislature in the northeastern United States. Participants were current and recently retired state representatives who reported having significant family responsibilities, which includes having children at home under the age of 18 and/or primary caretaking responsibilities for a family member. The original sample included 23 state legislators; this project focuses on the experiences of the 17 women representatives (see Table 1).

Participants were identified through a snowball sampling method. This convenience sample resulted in an overrepresentation of Democrats. The average age in the sample is 60.6 years. This reflects a country-wide trend in age among legislators (56 is the average age of all state legislators). Female state representatives, moreover, are on average two years older than their male counterparts (NCSL 2015). Legislators without children living at home spoke to the experience of juggling elder care with their work, which is an increasingly common family strain (Grundy and Henretta 2006).

State representatives were contacted via email. We followed up by telephone within one week if we did not receive a response. After each interview, participants were asked to

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2Significantly, state legislatures have become increasingly professionalized since the 1970s (Squire 2007).
refer names of colleagues who they knew had family responsibilities in addition to their legislative work. Data were collected until thematic saturation was reached. All but one interview, which were audio-recorded, were conducted in person at mutually convenient locations, including homes, private offices, and coffee shops. In the interview guide, questions were grouped into categories pertaining to the institutional, interactional, and individual levels of social life (Risman 2004). For instance, interviewees were asked, “How has your home life changed since you became a state representative” to tap interactions at home. Neutral probes were used to elicit more information about relevant aspects of legislators’ work and family lives. Legislators who had served multiple terms were asked retroactive questions if previous service included years in which they had responsibilities caring for children. In this article, all state representatives’ names are pseudonymous to ensure the privacy of the study participants.

**Results**

**The Problem: Doing Democratically Important Work with Limited Resources**

Legislators’ work involves policymaking, political work, and constituent services, broadly speaking. While the policymaking work is largely concentrated within a six-month session period, constituents’ interests need representing daily, every month of the year. As such, the state legislature as an institution violates conventional norms of job accessibility (Zerubavel 1979), requiring state representatives be unencumbered and available to their constituency at a moment’s notice. This qualifies the legislature as a gendered institution (Acker 1990; Kenney 1996). For legislators who hold primary caretaking responsibilities, which is disproportionately women (Thomas et al. 2002), this results in conflict between legislative and family duties.

Legislators’ sense of job involvement is derived from an awareness of how their work, especially sponsoring and voting on legislation, impacts people in their communities. Their unique sense of responsibility in their representative roles serves as a lynchpin in the issue of work-family balance in a volunteer institution that in most cases offers no administrative staff or office supplies and insufficient pay to support a family on legislative labor alone. Rachel Bell describes the difficulty of navigating work and family responsibilities when one’s work impacts the democratic process:

> They’re not going to say, “Don’t go take care of your mother.” But you feel really bad because you’ll get to [Representatives’ Hall] and your colleagues will be like, “Oh, you weren’t here last week, and we had this vote.” On most votes, you wouldn’t make a difference. But every once in a while, there’s a vote that’s close. If you’re not there, it could change whether it becomes a law or not.

Having the weight of a constituency as a factor in a volunteer’s decision-making process impacts both action and emotion. As Melissa Johnson summarizes: “When you’re in session . . . and you have to run out to go to the bathroom, you’re missing something. So, you have to time it so you can miss as little as possible.” Therefore, the way citizen legislators manage their responsibilities has affective weight as well as effects on the policymaking process.

Although their actions as state representatives are democratically important, volunteer legislators work in an institutional context of limited resources. As a result, work and family time often become conflated. Peggy Adams summarizes:

> You’re public, and people have the right to be in touch with you. But in a place like this, where with few exceptions we don’t have offices, we don’t have staff, we don’t even have phones. . . . You get emails and letters from constituents, and you get calls at home. I think that’s the biggest difference, that [my work] permeates daily life.

Without staff to support their work, state representatives highly committed to their work borrow from personal time to accomplish legislative work. As a result, legislators may stay

| Table 1. Sample Summary Statistics for Women Legislators. |
|----------------|--------------------|----------------|----------------|
| **Demographics** | **Mean/Count (SD)/Percentage** |
| Age | 60.6 (9.7) |
| Children | 3 (1.2) |
| Marital status | |
| Married | 15 88 |
| Not married | 2 22 |
| Class | |
| Middle | 8 47 |
| Upper-middle | 4 23.5 |
| Upper | 5 29.5 |
| Employment status | |
| Legislator only | 9 53 |
| Legislator + paid job | 8 47 |
| Political involvement | |
| Terms in office | 5.8 (4.7) |
| Leadership position | 12 70 |
| Party affiliation | |
| Democrat | 15 88 |
| Republican | 2 22 |

Note: Only one respondent self-identified as a non-white race.

*Terms are two years in length.*

3Professionalized, full-time legislatures have positions such as legislative aides, research assistants, communication directors, and interns who work in representatives’ offices and assist with scheduling, preparing talking points, policy research, and constituent contact.
up late at night to read co-sponsorship emails, respond to constituent communication, and do research on bills passing through committees.

Aside from instrumental resources, like staff, office supplies, and monetary resources, volunteer legislators lack status associated with professionalized legislative work. Consequentially, legislators described their labor as undervalued and undersupported in over two-thirds of the interviews. This is strikingly gendered in that volunteer work has been historically associated with greater female participation (Wilson and Musick 1997). Samantha Williams describes how she felt her spouse undervalued her legislative service: “Oh, my husband teases me about it every day, for 12 years! He calls it my hobby. And I know that doesn’t sound very professional, but he says, ‘You’re doing that for free.’ But you know, it’s my community service.” When legislators’ spouses devalued their volunteer political work, they might be pressed to miss session days or committee meetings for nonessential commitments. Frances Anderson captures this tension in the following narrative:

I have experienced some, not lack of understanding exactly, but sometimes a little impatience. Especially being in the House, and my husband knows it’s not the way it was in the Senate when you absolutely, really have to be there every day. So [he’ll say], “Come on! Do you really need to be there?” Like, “Yeah.”

A sense that their legislative work is less socially valued than paid employment seemed to be internalized by some legislators who described this phenomenon. For instance, Frances later described feeling guilty because her political work did “not contribute” to the family:

I get mileage checks coming from [my town]. That’s about it. So when you do this work it’s not that you’re contributing to the family economy. I mean, it really is like having a volunteer job but you at least get a little money for traveling. So there was a certain amount of guilt associated with it.

While it may seem curious that female public servants themselves developed discourses that undervalued their legislative work, this confirms Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) argument about the way gender is reinforced discursively in society. In sum, the problem of doing democratically important work under circumstances of limited resources (both related to the function of the job and social valuation of unpaid labor) results not only in time-related binds (Hochschild 1997) but also affective repercussions the legislators must manage (Hochschild 1983).

**The Consequence: Negative Affect**

Representing a constituency in state government with limited resources to do the job causes legislators to experience negative secondary emotions—feelings elicited through the pairing of emotional circumstances with the labels attached to those events (Kemper 1987). During interviews, women emphasize feelings of stress when they cannot meet time demands and guilt when there is insufficient time to be with their families. Based on women’s self-identified sources of stress and guilt, overwhelmingly tied to work-family conflict, the cause of this negative affect, too, is gendered.

Stress refers to any social demand requiring an adjustment in behavioral patterns (Folkman and Lazarus 1980). About two-thirds of the women in our sample describe juggling both work and family responsibilities as stressful. This finding supports prior research on the “both/and” schema used by female public officials when considering private sphere concerns and public ambitions (C. S. Rosenthal 2001): Women politicians tend to manage feelings of stress and guilt by trying to juggle demands from work and family instead of choosing between demands (“and/or”), a strategy more common among men in C. S. Rosenthal’s (2001) sample of public officials.4

Women with significant family responsibilities attribute stress to the volume of their legislative workloads while also trying to juggle family obligations. Ellen Simmons laments difficulty managing her many responsibilities:

I think most challenging was meeting the responsibilities: of attending the committee work days, attending the session days. Now they don’t go so long, but when I started, the session days could go into the evening. Trying to make it all work, and also leaving enough time in my schedule as a representative, a mother, a wife, an employee, a friend, to do the best job I could for all of those.

Legislators associate conflict with trying to fulfill multiple duties, leaving some stressed to the point of frustration. Wendy Powell’s feelings of stress from “too much work” is representative of the experiences working mothers in the sample share:

There were times when I felt like it was too much. I mean, Finance Committee is a lot of work. And I didn’t want things to go by me that I didn’t understand. So, I felt like, “God, am I ever going to get all this done? And still be able to have a life?” I definitely had that frustration when I was like, “Well, I just blow at this, at both things [being a state representative and being a

4“Among the six male legislators in our sample, stress was emphasized in terms of marital relationships. For instance, Brian Hall describes, “The biggest stress is when I know I’m going to be late, and I know that I really should be home helping. On a late Wednesday night when we have a bunch of bills we just have to stay for, and I know that my wife has worked a full day, and the last thing she wants to do is make dinner. That’s stressful for us.” Notably, married men serving in the legislature can often fall back on support from wives when session runs late, whereas the majority of women must find ways to perform their jobs and ensure care at home.
mother. I should just give them both up!” [laughs] You just get stressed and there was a lot of work to do. And I didn’t like showing up and feeling like I didn’t know what was going on.

Along the same line, Melissa Johnson, whose children arrive home from elementary school at 4 PM, describes how she would try to maximize her presence at sessions while also ensuring she makes it home in time for her children’s return from school: “I’ll vote until that time when I know I have thirty minutes to get home, and then I’ll run out to the car and zip up the highway to get home, usually about the time the bus is pulling up to the house.” For this mother and most other women in the sample, balancing both work and family makes their political work not only challenging but also stressful.

Another emotion state representatives refer to is guilt, particularly in relation to missing family time. Women in our sample express guilt with less frequency than stress: nine women (about one-half of the sample) indicate feelings of guilt during the interviews. Women legislators brought up guilt with respect to missing care time, such as being home to make meals or provide physical or emotional care for their families. For these women, guilt is compounded by not conforming to gender norms of being “good mothers” (Hays 1996) in addition to generally missing time spent as a family. These findings align with past scholarship on the gendered division of household tasks (Bianchi et al. 2012; Hochschild 1989; Titchenor 2005) and the concomitant affective repercussions for transgressing gender expectations (Johnston and Swanson 2006; Lively, Steelman, and Powell 2010).

When describing an average day in the legislature, Teresa Harris, who has two young children at home, narrates the guilt-ridden thoughts passing through her mind while sitting in Representatives Hall: “What are the kids doing? Do they miss me? Are they having fun? What’s going on at home? I hope they went outside and didn’t sit in front of the TV and watch Caillou!” Beyond day-to-day concerns, mothers’ guilt accumulates over time. They express feeling guilty about missing stretches of time with their families. For instance, Wendy Powell feels she was not available to support her children while she was serving in the legislature:

My children ate a lot more fast food. Truly. I gave up laundry. My husband took over the laundry. Things like homework. I feel so bad for my son, my baby, because he didn’t have the benefit of having someone there to answer questions for him. I was a volunteer at school for all the years that my daughters were in school, and my son. But his was so minimal in comparison. I mean, I really didn’t get to spend that much time there. So I feel I wasn’t there to support my son’s education. It’s true. He would tell you the same thing.

Peggy Adams, who was finishing her last term in office, alludes to the strain she felt when she could not be available to her family: “You don’t have as much time to spend with your family. Maybe when you have time, it’s not as quality a time because you’re a little bit tired or you’re a little bit stressed or your focus is someplace else.”

Guilt associated with the tension between work and family responsibilities is complicated in cases where representatives had parents to care for in addition to children at home. The examples of legislators in the “sandwich generation” (Grundy and Henretta 2006) in our sample, six of the women interviewed, demonstrate elderly care responsibilities often being placed on female legislators. One of these women, Suzi Moore, describes feeling guilty if she stays late at a legislative session:

Sometimes we do have session until so late, and everyone has other things that they need to do. And it’s not often, but sometimes it will go until 6 or 6:30 PM and I, uh, I have to pick up so and so or take care of my dad. I just have to do stuff. And I’m like, “Should I sit here, or should I go do what I need to do?” And I look around and if I see they have a quorum, I’m out of there. It’s like, I have to [take care of my father]. Because if you don’t, you can’t live with yourself.

Another legislator, Frances Anderson, chose to leave office for a period of time at the peak of her legislative career because she felt a strong sense of guilt as a result of missing time caring for her mother: “By then I was [a deputy leader] in the House, so I was even busier than usual, than before. And um, it really started to seem self-indulgent then when my mother came home.” In short, negative emotions in concert with time-based conflict, from either child or elder care responsibilities while serving as a state representative, require women to take action to mitigate conflict.

The “Solution”: Coping Strategies

Considering the emotional weight of their unpaid political work and the need to balance family obligations—if not also paid employment—volunteer legislators note a variety of ways they cope with their wide-ranging responsibilities and the emotions associated with juggling these commitments. Coping is conceptualized in this study as “a defense system whose purpose is to reduce tension and restore equilibrium” (Folkman and Lazarus 1980:221). The coping strategies identified by the state representatives in our sample are consistent with Folkman and Lazarus’s (1980) conceptualization of methods oriented toward managing conflict. Although time is a social experience, emotional responses to time are experienced individually (Mullaney and Shope 2012). As such, time management requires what Folkman and Lazarus (1980) call problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies of coping. Considering Folkman and Lazarus (1980:227) find that “both problem- and emotion-focused coping were used in virtually every stressful encounter” in their research, the following data represent legislators’ techniques for managing their time and emotions concurrently. While
legislators’ coping strategies do not change the conditions of either their work or household, these management tactics allow the legislators to perform their elected civic duties.

Women’s strategies for managing their multiple and conflicting interests of work and family are notably constrained by gender. Institutional demands made of elected representatives who are primary caregivers shape the range of choices available for coping with time- and emotion-based conflict. The relational decisions women make (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013) to integrate family into their legislative duties or prioritize either work or family depend largely on the kinds of social support resources (Thoits 1995) available to them. When these strategies are not effective, some state representatives ultimately exit from public service.

Integration. Integrating work and family responsibilities is the most often reported method of managing the competing priorities of work and family among women, with 13—or three-quarters—of the women reporting using this tactic. Curiously, the dominant method of integration in this study runs counter to the zero-sum thinking about time that is widely held in society (Mullaney and Shope 2012). While integration is the most preferred coping method among women legislators, institutional norms in the legislature do not alleviate the additional boundary work (Mullaney and Shope 2012) this strategy creates.

Overall, women’s attitudes toward integrating their work and family responsibilities are positive. They regard the ability to integrate legislative labor with family as a unique characteristic of work in a volunteer institution that allows greater flexibility than a professional legislature. Rachel Bell illustrates how integration can be a positive coping strategy:

That makes it really fun, when you can have it be, whether it’s my mom or my kids, have them involved down there. ‘Cause otherwise it’s these two different hats. You know? It’s like [the Capitol] seems so separate from what’s going on at home. And sometimes it’s sort of like a paradigm shift when you’re going between the two.

That is not to say that integration is always enriching—several women mention how integration itself can be a source of stress. However, the generally positive attitude of women toward integrating their work and family lives contrasts with the unanimously negative attitude of the men in our sample toward such a combination of roles.5

Women legislators refer to instances where integrating “works” in terms of saving time. Integration allows them to do their jobs as mothers while serving in the legislature. In this manner, Emily Foster describes bringing her son to committee meetings:

He was in third or fourth grade. And he would come up and sit on the floor behind me during the committee and—he was supposed to be doing his homework, but he can now recite parts of those hearings about what people said and stuff. So, he was obviously listening to it. But that worked, having him on the floor behind me there.

Beyond the time-saving effect of integration, another outcome legislators describe is positive emotions from sharing their work time with their children. Samantha Williams shares how incorporating her children into her work was a good experience for her children:

I brought [my daughter] to session until she could walk and didn’t want to sit on my lap anymore. Then I had to stop bringing her. My older daughter used to come, too. She’d sit up in the gallery when we were in session. They both used to come to the committees and sit out in the audience. So, they both always sort of thought of the State House and the LOB [Legislative Office Building] as their second home. They know the buildings really well and they’re very fond of it. And I think they would tell you the same thing.

Like homeschooling mothers, Representative Williams evokes nostalgia (“second home”) to manage her emotions from integrating her work and family commitments (Lois 2010).

Positive affect from integrating may be explained by Johnston and Swanson’s (2006) study, where it was found that working mothers construct themselves as “good mothers” by keeping less mental separation between work and home. Integrating work and family lives may create a sense of “meaningful work” (Grady and McCarthy 2008) for mothers in the legislature.

Although integration often works in terms of allowing women to balance multiple responsibilities, conjoining their work and family can itself be a source of stress. As Mullaney and Shope (2012) demonstrate in their research on the direct home sales industry, work that allows significant temporal “freedom” also tends to have loose boundaries between work and family. Similarly, integration requires more boundary work, or “conscious choices about how to control one’s time and how to integrate or separate home and work” (Mullaney and Shope 2012:65). Reflecting on her time since serving in the legislature, Wendy Powell shares how she would have liked to put better boundaries around both her time at work and time with her family:

Knowing what I know now, I think that I would have approached a little bit differently certain things, and set more time that was special time that was only with my family. Or time when I wasn’t with my family, and stick to it more. A lot of the time

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5Men interviewed for this study seemed suspicious of people who integrate family with legislative work. James Turner asserts, “I don’t think it is appropriate for me to insert my family into all of my public affairs as a legislator. Or in fact, anything other than saying, ‘I have a nice family, so families are valuable to me.’” In short, this strategy could be viewed as a political tactic rather than a way to “make it work.”
they got blended. They got tangled up together, which wasn’t always good.

Under the current practices of the citizen legislature, integrating work and family can be alienating. For example, Teresa Harris illustrates how managing breastfeeding at work caused her to feel isolated from her peers in the State House:

When I started [in the legislature], I was still nursing my son. So, I requested a seat in the back row because I had to leave to go pump, to feed [my son] during the day. I would go and pump every couple of hours, and carried around a little cooler bag with breastmilk with me wherever I went. And no one else had children that age, or they weren’t trying to breastfeed their children and work.

At times, women even feel that bringing their family to work could threaten their careers. During campaign season, Joan Phillips describes feeling ostracized by other political actors who claimed she was using her family for political gain:

I might have to take [my son] campaigning with me, too. Because I may not be able to leave him alone with [my husband]. So, I figure, “Well, I’ll just take him with me.” Put him in the car and go knocking on doors. But then I can see the GOP saying, “Oh, she’s dragging her son around for votes.” Because they’ve done that to me already!

In this way, the best case scenario for working mothers was compromised in a political institution that does not facilitate or normalize such a time-saving strategy.

Prioritizing. A less preferable method state representatives use to manage their competing work and family commitments is to weigh the importance of their responsibilities and choose one commitment over another. One form prioritizing took was ceding personal time: Over half of the women legislators in the sample report reducing personal time to balance their many responsibilities. In line with Hays’s (1996) intensive motherhood ideology, women’s personal time (that could have otherwise been used for self-care) is sacrificed to take care of family members as well as balance legislative work. For some women, “free time” is what they would otherwise use to do household maintenance, so it is not surprising that most of the women described “housework time” as the free time they were missing. This is consistent with Jennifer Lois’s 2010 findings about homeschooling mothers who redefine “me-time” to manage time shortage. To quote Samantha Williams: “You know, there was less time to do things like keep the house clean, decorate the house, or that kind of stuff. There wasn’t much time for that kind of stuff. And that had both to do with having kids and having the second job.” Similarly, Martha Jones shares:

Well, I’m not cooking like I used to cook. I’m not gardening the way I used to garden. I’m not even reading. I used to read a book every other week. I love to read. I’m not reading the way I used to read, and that makes me sad, or disappoints me.

The gendered division of labor in the women’s homes, which does not reverse when they become state representatives, puts them in a position to make “hard choices” (Risman 1998).

Beyond putting others before self, volunteer state representatives face the unusual freedom to prioritize family over potential legislative work. Of the 17 women legislators interviewed, 12 describe instances in which they prioritize responsibilities and choose either work or family. The extent to which prioritizing takes place depends largely on a legislator’s economic means. It was more common for self-reported upper-class representatives to have nannies that took care of their children outside of school hours. However, there seemed to be a consensus among women that their family should not be limited by their work responsibilities.

The legislators emphasize that making choices between attending legislative events and being present for their family is a difficult decision. Melissa Johnson shares her internal conflict when deciding to what extent she should prioritize her legislative work while ensuring that her family’s needs are being met:

It’s just a balancing act, and sometimes you have to make choices. You make the best choice you can given the situation you have. I think the family knows that, and as long as you’re putting in time to be with them and they don’t feel neglected, then they’re supportive. But if it gets to the point when it feels like you’re spending so much time on your legislative activities and no time with them and not including them in the legislative activities so they feel that they’re left alone all the time, then it’s a problem.

Although Representative Johnson’s account demonstrates prioritizing family over work, most women representatives construct a theme of “getting the priorities straight” and putting family first. Brenda Smith, speaking from a position of House Leadership, says, “You know, it’s always clear that family comes before legislature. I say that to everybody. I don’t think I’m unique.” Teresa Harris echoes this sentiment:

That’s always been sort of my bottom line, is my children come first. We had an end-of-year committee barbeque that conflicted with my daughter’s end-of-year school party that the parents were invited to. I went to the school party and skipped the barbeque. You have to make sacrifices and decide. I think you have to ultimately decide what’s more important to you . . . . I didn’t really enjoy, honestly, the long session days when I was away from [my children] for that long.

Because session days are inflexible and can run late into the evening, parents with child care responsibilities must choose between family and serving their constituency. Effectively, this is not a true choice in the absence of reliable social support.
There is evidence of gender differences in prioritizing when state representatives are asked if their experiences in the State House would have been different as legislators of the opposite gender. Several female legislators describe different attitudes men have toward their family responsibilities. They perceive that family commitments weigh male representatives down less than their female counterparts. The following quote from Suzi Moore illustrates this:

If we’re trying to figure out a meeting time or date, those who aren’t divorced will say, “Oh my wife is home, she’ll take care of the kids. I don’t have to be home until whenever.” But the women, you’ll see every woman pull her iPad, phone, or calendar out and say, “Oh I’ve got to take my kid to soccer.” One lady’s pregnant: “I have to do this.” You know. [laughs] But the men . . . and that’s what happens, because we do have more and I think our values are greater. So then, the men are the ones who go to the meeting.

This suggests a twofold gender difference in prioritizing: both in how legislators personally prioritize work and family through individual choices as well as how legislators view others’ capacities to prioritize work and family responsibilities.

**Leaving the Legislature.** When demands from work and family on legislators are too incompatible, some legislators “choose” to leave the legislature. Three women in the sample were finishing their last term in office at the time of interviews; another three had taken a break from serving as representatives because of family responsibilities earlier in their legislative careers. Only one man in my sample made the choice to leave the legislature because of a combination of family and career aspirations. The women representatives’ reasons for leaving reflect tension between legislative work and simply not having enough time to perform the duties for which parents who are legislators are responsible. Teresa Harris, who decided to not run for reelection, attests:

I like what I do up there, but when I got pregnant again, I did a quick analysis of exactly how much free time I didn’t have and said, “I’m in over my head. This has got to go. This is not a good choice for me right now.” Which doesn’t mean that I didn’t like it, because I did. And I would go back to it if I had the time to do it, but I wouldn’t go back to it and half-ass it. Excuse my language. I wouldn’t.

Martha Jones also offers work-family conflict as the primary reason for taking a break from the legislature when she was a young mother:

Oh, because of my family. Because my kids were still in school and, um, my husband had a business and I did all his paperwork and things. It was just too much. I couldn’t keep up with it. Plus I wanted to be around the kids. They were in school and they were playing sports and, you know. So I just felt I needed to be home. And so I stayed home and I did local things. And then, a couple years ago I said, “I want to go back there.”

The “opt out” trend found among women in this sample reflects the disproportionate normative pressures women face in society to fulfill domestic responsibilities even when women are in a successful career track (Stone 2007). Strikingly, all of the women who leave mention a desire to, at some point, continue serving as state representatives.

**Discussion**

A volunteer-based political institution shapes state representatives’ experiences of work-family conflict. At the same time, gender constrains the range of methods by which legislators may manage their political work with their home responsibilities. While less professionalized (i.e., part-time, low-staff, less strictly time-bound) institutions made up of “everyday citizens” are often touted as more democratic given the relatively low barriers to entry, the labor performed in these institutions is characterized by unique challenges—namely, limited administrative resources, lack of compensation for legislative work, and a concomitant devaluation of political work done on the part of volunteers. These institutional constraints result in time binds and negative affect with which volunteer state representatives must cope. Women state representatives use coping strategies that allow them to conform with, or challenge, gender norms concerning both motherhood and public service. Legislators’ descriptions of integrating children into legislative committee meetings, prioritizing family or constituent work, and making decisions about running for reelection are steeped in gendered narratives.

These testimonies reflect the situated experiences of the legislators who participated in this research and the complex institutional mechanisms that shape volunteer state representatives’ coping strategies. Moreover, by sampling from a single citizen legislature, we controlled for cultural differences among legislatures. However, this study does not represent experiences of all state representatives: Women legislators serving in “professional” legislatures who receive full-time pay and have administrative support may face different challenges. Additionally, a nonrandom sampling method was utilized that may overrepresent groups within a constrained social network.

How might this understanding of gendered coping strategies help in addressing the gender inequality in political representation? The presence of women in our elected bodies has real implications for the representation of interests in the democratic process (Swers 2013). By valuing volunteer political labor as a kind of work, we can identify volunteer legislators’ needs to achieve balance (Roth 2016). Our multilevel analysis points to two key leverage points—at the level of society and the volunteer political institution—to make political candidacy more attractive to people with family obligations as well as facilitate participation of women once elected into political office.

On a broad scale, it is imperative for families to pursue an egalitarian division of household labor in practice. Our
findings demonstrate the connection between this family-level inequity and political inequality in a representative democracy. Within volunteer political institutions, time-based conflicts could be reduced for all members with children or elder care responsibilities. Clear end-times for session days, for instance, would prevent losing members to time-induced attrition and hectic or costly caregiving arrangements. Programs that facilitate women’s preferred coping strategy for balancing work and family, integration, could be developed. Legislatures warrant inclusion, both in terms of democratic political representation and the representatives working to advocate for their constituencies.

**Conclusion**

Our findings make a significant contribution to the literature on gender and politics by applying scholarship in the sociology of work and family in the context of a volunteer political institution. Although citizen legislatures rely on elected volunteers, there is a strong sense of investment in constituent service felt by the legislators. The sense of responsibility of which legislators speak in tandem with the context of limited resources and administrative support poses a unique tension between their work and family commitments. Significantly, volunteer civic work does not fall neatly into the schema of work-family conflict and balance because it is unremunerated and tends to be more “flexible” than what we typically conceive of as work. We suggest that volunteerism and political labor be conceived as its own analytic dimension—a third shift—in family studies and be given greater attention, particularly in research on gender and politics.

This study brings up questions to be addressed in subsequent research. If, as our findings suggest, gender stratifies women’s experiences of balancing political work and family in a citizen legislature, how does this research on balancing political work and family in a volunteer state legislature compare to the experience of elected officials in other local and state representative institutions in our society, such as select boards and school boards? Moreover, how does gender intersect with other aspects of legislators’ backgrounds (e.g., socioeconomic status, race, geographic location) to shape individual coping strategies? To understand the multidimensional, multilevel, and inequality-laden process of coping with volunteerism, paid employment, and family commitments, different social standpoints (Hill Collins 1986) must be a focus of future inquiry.

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**Author Biographies**

**Morgan C. Matthews** is a PhD student in sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research explores volunteer work, legislative institutions, and political representation from a gender perspective. Her work has appeared in *The Society Pages* and sociology conferences.

**Kathryn J. Lively** is a professor of sociology at Dartmouth College. Her areas of specialization include emotion, identity, and gender. Her work has appeared in such outlets as the *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *Work & Occupations*, and *Symbolic Interaction*. 

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*Author Biographies*