

The Public Policy Roots of Women's Increasing College Degree Attainment: The National Defense Education Act of 1958 and the Higher Education Act of 1965

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How do we explain the steep increase in women's higher educational attainment that began in the mid-twentieth century and has continued, unchecked, in subsequent decades? Although many point to the emergence of feminism and the creation of Title IX in the 1970s as the origins of this trend, I argue that two federal student aid programs—the National Defense Education Act of 1958 and the Higher Education Act of 1965—helped set the stage for women to surpass men as the recipients of bachelor's degrees. Using historical analysis of primary and secondary resources, I present two related case studies that demonstrate the central role that unique political contexts and nondiscriminatory program administration have played in lawmakers' capacity to promote equal opportunity through public policy. This study suggests that women's increasing college degree attainment has important, but frequently overlooked, public policy roots.

Since the 1960s, American women have made tremendous strides in the area of higher education. They have represented the majority of undergraduate students in the United States for more than thirty years; and during the 2012–13 academic year, women earned more than half of the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees awarded by the nation's colleges and universities.¹ Women's prominent presence in contemporary higher education contrasts dramatically with the gender inequality that characterized educational attainment from the establishment of postsecondary education in the United States in 1636 well into the twentieth century. It also has important implications for women's first-class citizenship. In addition to providing knowledge and skills, college education yields

valuable resources like income and social networks that, in turn, facilitate greater economic, social, and political inclusion in society.² Women's increased higher educational attainment has contributed to the progress that they have made toward full citizenship.

How do we explain the steep increase in women's higher educational attainment that began in the mid-twentieth century and has continued, unchecked, in subsequent decades? Scholars have pointed to a variety of social, economic, and political factors that have contributed to the growing rate at which women earn college degrees. For example, the decline of “domesticity”—the notion that women were best suited to the private sphere—signaled an important alteration of Americans' expectations regarding women's roles in society. As Americans began to view women as rightful participants in the public sphere, the notion that they would pursue higher education became less controversial, and women's movement into the nation's colleges and

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1. National Center for Education Statistics, “Table 318.30: Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctor's Degrees Conferred by Postsecondary Institutions, by Sex of Student and Discipline Division: 2012–13,” https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_318.30.asp, accessed May 28, 2015.

2. T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950); Judith N. Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

played in driving this trend. For students of politics, the emergence of second-wave feminism in the 1970s and the creation of Title IX in 1972 loom large as explanations for the strides that women have made in earning college degrees. Yet, as we saw at the beginning of this analysis, the rate at which women earn college degrees began to increase prior to—and thus apart from—the emergence of second-wave feminism and the passage of Title IX. This analysis suggests that the NDEA of 1958 and the HEA of 1965 provided women with valuable aid that expanded their access to college degrees and helped to set the stage for women to surpass men as the recipients of bachelor's degrees.

In examining the creation and implementation of the NDEA and the HEA, this article highlights the public policy roots of women's college degree attainment, focusing particularly on the role that unique political contexts, strategic policy design, and nondiscriminatory program administration have played in lawmakers' ability to promote equal opportunity through higher education. Although focusing narrowly on two case studies cannot yield a definitive explanation for the increase in women's educational attainment that we have seen in recent decades, this analysis prompts us to look beyond the conventional explanations for women's progress to include the landmark financial aid programs of the 1950s and 1960s.²⁰⁹

It also reveals important lessons for the study of American political development. For example, a handful of relatively liberal Southern Democrats were stalwart—if unlikely—champions of the NDEA and the HEA, whose efforts were central forces driving their creation. While Northern Democrats were generally much more supportive of federal education proposals than their Southern counterparts, Sen. Lister Hill and Rep. Carl Elliott deviated from this trend. Hill and Elliott, who hailed from Alabama, subverted Cold War politics and carefully negotiated the politics of civil rights in order to pass the NDEA in the window of opportunity provided by the *Sputnik* crisis. Hill and Elliott demonstrated a commitment to securing federal resources for their constituents that trumped many of the concerns—including suspicion that federal education support would force desegregation on Southern schools—that prevented their counterparts from supporting such measures. Scholars have recognized Southern Democrats as powerful veto players in the development of U.S. social policy during the twentieth

century. But, as these case studies have illustrated, it is important to recognize varying preferences among members of this group. For economic liberals like Hill and Elliott, the prospect of securing federal resources for their region and improving the socioeconomic status of their constituents proved a compelling reason to champion federal higher education legislation.

Examining these cases also reveals the significance of policy design for creating government programs that effectively promote equal opportunity. The considerable extent to which the NDEA and the HEA helped to expand women's access to college degrees exemplifies the value of more universally targeted policies for aiding disadvantaged groups while also achieving political durability. Granted, social programs that narrowly target benefits to the poor—such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—tend to cost less than broader social programs, while efficiently allocating benefits to the neediest citizens. However, in a political context that often stigmatizes the poor, such programs frequently lack the widespread political support necessary to sustain their benefits for marginalized groups. Through a combination of need-based and need-blind student aid, the NDEA and the HEA had a sweeping, nearly universal reach that resulted in substantial support for needy college students as well as considerable political stability.

For women, the effects of this policy design proved powerful. While men had long enjoyed numerous private and public sources of financial support for their higher educational endeavors—the preponderance of family contributions, work opportunities, scholarships, and generous government support from the G.I. Bill—such sources had traditionally provided women with very little. Thus, they had a disproportionate amount to gain from the NDEA and the HEA. By providing gender-neutral financial aid, lawmakers helped to ameliorate gender inequality in access to college degrees and to the social, economic, and political benefits that they yield. This pair of case studies demonstrates how a general approach to targeting social policy benefits can prove disproportionately advantageous for members of an underprivileged group.

In examining the effect that the NDEA and the HEA have had for women's college degree attainment, we find that nondiscriminatory program administration is a crucial factor in fulfilling the promise of gender-egalitarian policy design. By centering NDEA program administration around the mission of cultivating all of the nation's available brainpower, lawmakers effectively set in motion the first broad-reaching student aid program that promoted greater college affordability for women. They also paved the way for nondiscriminatory administration of the HEA, which would further entrench the

209. For example, future analyses of the role that higher education policies have played in women's educational attainment might look to the effect that state level financial aid policies have had on women's access to college degrees. As the federal government has assumed a greater role in shaping who has access to college degrees, the question remains as to whether the states have adjusted their efforts as well.

federal government in the role of expanding access to higher education for women as well as men.

With the passage of the NDEA and the HEA, lawmakers dealt a stunning blow to gender inequality in access to college degrees. Taken together, the NDEA and the HEA revolutionized college affordability for women, setting a new standard for federal involvement in higher education and helping to set the stage for stunning increases in women's higher educational attainment. Indeed, it is possible that these programs represent crucial antecedents that paved the way for the prominent victories that women achieved during the 1970s. After removing financial need as a barrier to higher educational access for women, lawmakers were able to turn their attention to leveling discriminatory admissions policies, which represented the final barrier to women's access to college degrees.

In taking seriously the role that federal higher education policies have played in women's educational achievement, this article contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the role that lawmakers have played in determining who has access to college degrees in the United States and the citizenship-enhancing benefits that accompany these degrees. Although many think of the 1970s as the genesis of the progress that American women have made in recent decades, federal student aid policies that have made crucial contributions to women's movement toward first-class citizenship were created years before. This study suggests that the creation and administration of the NDEA and the HEA played an important role in expanding equal educational opportunity for women and may even have helped to set the stage for the victories that women achieved during the 1970s and beyond.

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