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Women scarce on Sunday shows

By [Erika Lovley](#) | 6/13/10 @ 7:25 PM EST



"If it's Sunday, it's more men wearing dark suits."

So far, none of the five major Sunday morning television news shows has embraced that as a promotional slogan. But women's advocates — armed with new data showing that the shows are a bastion of male power — say it would be an apt description for the lot of them.

Even as women have vaulted to be House speaker and hold a host of other influential positions on Capitol Hill, female lawmakers continue to be under-represented as guests on the Sunday shows.

According to research by American University's Women & Politics Institute, female lawmakers have composed 13.5 percent of the total Sunday show appearances by all representatives and senators this year.

The suggestion that the Sunday shows are less hospitable to women has prompted a debate over who's to blame among network producers, Capitol Hill political operatives and women's advocates.

Some academic researchers and press secretaries for women in Congress say the network bookers have a men-in-suits mind-set that leads to familiar faces appearing over and over — and vital women's voices being muffled on Sunday shows that historically are an important platform of Washington power.

The shows' producers bridle at the criticism, saying that, despite their strong interest in booking more women, the shows must be topical and reflect the reality that men still hold more of the most influential and newsmaking positions in Congress.

And they say some congressional women — Nancy Pelosi chief among them — do not help the cause by making themselves so difficult to book. Most producers say they try to recruit female lawmakers nearly every weekend but receive a steady stream of rejection slips.

"I've probably asked her 25 times. She is just unwilling to do it," Betsy Fischer, executive producer of NBC's "Meet the Press," said of Pelosi. "Literally, I have our booker e-mail her every Monday, but she's not available. She does not seem to be making herself accessible."

Other Sunday show producers agreed that some leading female politicians need to make a more concerted effort to make themselves available when the shows call, which the producers assert is often.

The implication is that female politicians — struggling to balance home, work and travel commitments in the same way many female business executives must — don't lunge as frantically for the spotlight as many publicity-starved male politicians do.

Women make up 17 percent of the membership of the House and Senate, a proportion that is only a couple of percentage points higher than how often they appear on Sunday shows. But some advocates of more appearances by women said the shows should be working harder — with a kind of talking-heads version of affirmative action — to have women appear in numbers more closely approximating their percentage of society as a whole.

"Structuring the Sunday shows so women get visibility, even if they haven't climbed the ladder, is important. The more national recognition these women get, the better their chances are of being elevated in Congress. Leadership wants the people with public image," said Jennifer Lawless, director of the Women & Politics Institute.

"There aren't a lot of people calling us to do Sunday shows," said a prominent female House member's press secretary, who did not want to be identified. "They largely go back to the same people, week after week. They've done a poor job of tapping into prominent female leaders, and that's not just a problem for women on the Hill; it's a problem for Americans because they are rarely hearing the women's perspective. My boss isn't chairing major committees, but there are many things she is heavily involved in and could still comment on."

Thus far this year, the five major Sunday shows — including NBC's "Meet the Press," "Fox News Sunday," CBS's "Face the Nation," ABC's "This Week" and CNN's "State of the Union" — have had 148 appearances by congressional lawmakers. Of those, 128 were men and 20 were women.

Most of the shows are trying to freshen their formats and find ways to engage an audience that, across all news media platforms, is growing more fragmented. Even so, there can be a kind of same-old familiarity with the most frequent guests.

Senate Homeland Security Committee Chairman Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.) has appeared five times — as has Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Chairman Robert Menendez of New Jersey. House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio) has appeared four times, Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) have each appeared three times.

Meanwhile, Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Chairwoman Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) and Democratic Steering and Outreach Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow of Michigan have not appeared at all. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Florida, vice chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee, has appeared on only three Sunday talk shows this year. Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Blanche Lincoln (D-Ark.) has appeared once.

Rep. Jane Harman (D-Calif.), chairwoman of the House Homeland Security subcommittee on intelligence, has been on twice. Senate Intelligence Committee Chairwoman Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) leads the way among congressional women — with only three appearances.

But it is Pelosi — unquestionably a newsworthy figure and one the shows are dying to have on — who prompts the most debate among people following the women-on-Sundays argument.

Her communications advisers are conscious of not letting her become overexposed. In addition, when she does appear on Sunday shows, she often prefers that television cameras come to her, sometimes shooting in advance on Fridays from the comfort of her office. Some shows refuse to do the pretape, because it runs the risk of being outdated if news breaks during the weekend.

"Because of the speaker's busy travel schedule, her appearances on Sunday shows are limited. But there are many talented House Democratic women with expertise on many issues who would contribute greatly to the discussion on jobs, the economy, national security and energy," said Pelosi spokesman

Nadeam Elshami.

The result is that, while Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) has appeared 10 times on Sunday shows, Pelosi has appeared only twice.

Fischer and other successful women in Sunday television, including "State of the Union" host Candy Crowley, are struggling with the dynamic — a relative dearth of women in leadership roles on the Hill, according to Fischer and Tom Bettag, Crowley's executive producer.

In addition to Pelosi, only four women in the 111th Congress — all senators — currently sit in committee or leadership roles, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

The result: From Jan. 1 to June 13, "Meet the Press" featured only three female members of Congress, compared with 28 male lawmakers. "Fox News Sunday" had only two female lawmakers but 28 male lawmakers. CBS's "Face the Nation" hosted the highest number of female lawmakers — six, compared with 24 male lawmakers. CNN's "State of the Union" was not far behind, with six women and 29 men. ABC's "This Week" had three female members and 19 males.

"Nobody in the world feels more passionately about this than Candy, who is constantly saying 'this is crazy,'" that there isn't more of a female presence on Sunday shows, Bettag said. "But ... the glass ceiling in leadership positions is nearly unbreakable, and when you're booking for a show, for the sake of the viewer, we're constantly asking, 'Do we choose the woman versus the person shaping the vote?'"

But even younger lawmakers such as Wasserman Schultz understand why the dynamic exists.

"It is the highest-profile opportunity to advance my party's agenda. I make it a priority," said Wasserman Schultz, who appeared in a roundtable discussion Sunday on "Meet the Press." "Yes, I would say the lineup of the guests is disproportionately and over proportionately male. But much of that has to be chalked up that the invitations wind up being largely topical."

Sunday scheduling is an important obstacle for some of the most-sought-after women.

Sen. Claire McCaskill goes home almost every weekend to Missouri, where family plans often take precedence over Sunday shows. Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-Maine) tries to appear via satellite from her home in Bangor, Maine, where she travels almost every weekend. But it's a small media market with few studios to provide a remote shot.

Pelosi, Feinstein and Boxer — all key women — live on the West Coast, which would mean that even if a remote shot were possible the taping would have to be early, putting them in the chair as early as 6 a.m. for some shows.

"People assume we can put on whoever we want, but people have other things to do on Sunday besides a Sunday show," said "Face the Nation" Executive Producer Carin Pratt, who tried to book Boxer a few weeks ago, until scheduling got in the way. "Booking is a two-way street."

Fox News did not return requests for comment.

While congressional women are underrepresented, the shows don't lack for female faces overall. Almost every show features at least one female guest each weekend. And the Obama administration has provided multiple appearances by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, not to mention Elizabeth Warren, who chairs the congressional oversight panel for the bank bailout.

Women in politics say getting access to the most influential media platforms is only part of the challenge. Just below the surface lie deeper issues — endemic to the larger society — relating to how women are perceived as they gain more power and higher profiles. Some believe they are viewed through a more superficial lens than men of similar responsibility.

Harman says little has changed since one of her first national television appearances — a 1993 floor speech on C-SPAN.

"I worked over this brilliant 60-second presentation that was covered live on C-SPAN," she said.

Her first viewer comment: "Just tell Jane I love her outfit."

"That was an encounter with reality," Harman recalled.

Correction: The original version of this story incorrectly reported the number of women in Congress who hold leadership roles or committee chairmanships.

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